

# On the Concept of Power

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## ABSTRACT

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This dissertation provides a definition of “power”, and examines the implication of said definition for the study of politics. The exam of extant debates, from Dahl to Lukes and Morriss, shows that a proper definition of power is still to be had; those so far proposed are either circular and/or so detached from the concept’s meaning in ordinary language that they cease to be about power. Re-connecting power to its meaning in natural languages is the necessary premise to any study of politics, be it empirical, theoretical, or normative: without the concept of power, we could not conceive of politics as a specific domain, either to be scientifically inquired or acted into. To formulate a viable definition, we have to recognize that “power” is not a “thing” or phenomenon, but rather refers to a state, or a modality, within which persons may be situated. Power is a modal concept, and the relevant modality, or category, is that of possibility. More specifically, “power” denotes the status, or condition, of having possibilities available and representing them as such. If and only if both conditions are present, then power can meaningfully be attributed. The implications of this definition are far reaching, as they show how, by adopting perspectives that variously eschew the category of possibility, significant portions of political science and political philosophy are, by their own design, incapable of properly conceptualizing power, and therefore politics. The

main problem with political science is the attempt to methodologically reduce politics to causal and probabilistic regularities, which entails the disappearance of possibility in favor of necessity. Political philosophy, on the other hand, tends to prioritize various forms of a teleologically oriented normativity, which results in discarding possibility in favor of necessity, again losing sight of politics.

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# Introduction

This is a study of the concept of power, by which I mean a study of what we mean by “power” especially, though not exclusively, in relation to politics and human affairs. This may appear to be a trivial topic. It seems clear, after all, that we already know what we mean, as evidenced by the ample use we make of the concept of power in our languages, most of the times understanding each other without so much as a problem. This would be mostly true, but everything hinges on who are the “we” we are talking about. In fact, as soon as we move from ordinary, unreflective, uses toward attempts to formulate a precise explicit definition of “power”, common understanding appears to shatter, and meaning seems to slip out of reach.

Over many decades, a century if we go as far back as Max Weber’s seminal definition,<sup>1</sup> philosophers and social scientists have not only failed to agree upon a definition – which could be explained away if “power” were one of those “essentially contested concepts”<sup>2</sup> – but for the most part

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1. *Infra*, pp. 161-162.

2. Walter B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series* 56 (1955).

they have yet to produce anything that could even count as a valid conceptual definition. As we will observe in our first and second chapters, in fact, existing definitions of power are plagued by a circularity problem (power being defined by direct reference to power itself) which is itself related to incorrect implicit assumptions on the type of concept that power is, and how to formulate conceptual definitions to begin with.

The lack of a proper definition is bothersome because power is a defining concept for the domain of politics and thus, without a precise understanding of the former, any study of the latter is bound to remain on shaky ground. The classic statements about power being the focal concept of politics are perhaps not as common as they used to be;<sup>3</sup> but it is worth noting how, in their absence, no suitable substitute has been found to define politics as such. Lack of clarity concerning “power”, thus, leaves us with a variety of disciplines studying politics without a viable way to define their object or domain. At a lower level of abstraction, we surely are interested in assessing who has power, whether anyone has it at all, and who ought to have it; more so, indeed, than in the definition per se. The point, however, is that none of these empirical and normative questions can even be intelligibly formulated if we lack a clear understanding of what we mean by “power” in the first place. Such is precisely the situation we are presently in, as we will discuss at length throughout this work.

Part of the problem with previous definitional attempts is that they did not seriously take natural languages as their starting point, and thus lost sight of what ostensibly would have been their

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3. *Infra*, p. 1.

object, *i.e.* the concept to be defined. It is in fact clear that, even though ordinary language is often incapable of making itself explicitly precise, there is no other authority available to decide not just whether a conceptual definition is correct but, most importantly, whether it is actually about the concept it purports to describe. What many tried to do (and a few explicitly advocated, as we shall see) is instead to construct the concept of “power” in accord to their goals, be they normative or descriptive. By so proceeding, however, they could only get to “their” concept, rather than the actual concept of power, the actuality of which resides not in any goal theorists or scientists may entertain, but in its uses through languages (including, but not limited to, the manifold goals pursued by speakers of such languages).

This is the main reason why, when we specifically want to study and understand a concept – as opposed to the empirical referents of such concepts, if there are any, which can be productively studied only if the concept is sufficiently well understood – we should always heed to John L. Austin’s advice:

... ordinary language is *not* the last word: in principle it can everywhere be supplemented and improved upon and superseded. Only remember, it is the *first* word.<sup>4</sup>

If we did not start by considering ordinary language, what claim could we ever advance to be defining “power”, and not rather something else, created by ourselves for whatever purpose we might entertain? Once we have made clear and explicit the meaning of a concept as it exist amongst a community of speakers – which, unless we are committed Platonists, is the only way in

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4. John L. Austin, “A Plea for Excuses: The Presidential Address,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 57, no. 1 (1956), 11.



which a concept exists – we may be in a position to see inconsistencies, contradictions if there be any, and to further criticize applications and theories beyond the concept itself. Lacking a grounding in a common language, no definitional attempt could even make sense; and for a general and un-specialized concept such as “power”, said common language can only be language itself.

Harmonically to the aim of retrieving and making explicit the meaning of a concept, as employed in non-specialized languages, this work will cross a few disciplinary and thematic boundaries, encompassing examples, authors, and theories, that are not often observed together – especially given the ever-increasing academic specialization. We will go through the canonical definitional debates about power in political science and sociology, from the ‘60s onwards; we will rely on Hannah Arendt to understand the proper theoretical stance in studying power; we will dabble into the operational, mathematical, and philosophical discussions of causality and probability, in order to understand the implications of the concept of power for political science; in the course of our conceptual enquiry, we will take ideas and examples from theorists and philosophers as diverse as Rawls, Foucault, Habermas, Kant, Hobbes and Aristotle.

Such an eclectic approach seems unavoidable in this case, lest we remained embroiled within one or another disciplinary understanding of “power”, which by design would be constructed to support some specific theoretical or practical goal, and with that be detached by the ordinary meaning we would here like to explore and render explicit – a meaning which specialized uses may be relevant subsets of, but never represent the whole. There is no denying, however, that eclecticism has its downsides. The attempt to do justice to many and so diverse materials is bound

to appear superficial to the specialist and fastidious to the profane. Some readers, being privy to parts of the discourse but alien to others, are likely to experience both kinds of disappointment.

The attempt to strike a balance is further complicated by the fact that our subject-matter is no less complex for its being unspecialized. The abstract quality of much of the argument – which is unavoidable, being concerned with a concept that has no concrete referent – is likely to particularly irk some. Such problems are intrinsic to this kind of work, but of course they are further compounded by the limits of my knowledge and ability. This being the contingency of the situation, however, the only alternatives are to respectfully accept the difficulties of the task, or not to attempt it at all. I seem to have chosen the former possibility. In the remainder of this introduction I will try to plant a few signposts, hopefully helpful in orienting the reader within the work that shall follow.

Thus, before proceeding with the customary summary of chapters, I will elaborate a bit on what I understand conceptual analysis to be, and how it should be conducted, and then spend some more words upon the reasons to apply such a craft specifically to the concept of power.

## Concepts, conceptions, and how to study them

This work is, first and foremost, an exercise in conceptual analysis. Such craft is not much performed in relation to our object, despite the abundance of pieces titularly dedicated to “the concept of power”. We will see in some detail how and why that is the case, but a preliminary delimi-

tation of the scope of our enquiry may be helpful to prevent subsequent misunderstandings.

What, then, is a concept, and how would we go about analyzing it?

A concept may be defined as a general idea referring to a class of objects,<sup>5</sup> which are in some sense the same, so that they may be counted as different instances of the same one concept. This does not work perfectly for our case, since there is no object or thing referred to by the name of “power”. As we will discuss time and again, power is a modal concept, denoting not objects (concrete or abstract) but rather a state or modality objects, and most importantly subjects, can be in. We could take a further step toward generality merely by following etymology – *conceptus*, participle form of *concipere*, derived from *cum* + *capere* – and thus say that a concept is anything that is conceived, that is to say taken or gathered together, by a mind. This is somewhat better, but would also lead to problems, since the metaphorical meaning of “conceiving” is itself quite fuzzy, and furthermore the reference to the mind would open its own can of philosophical worms.

Yet another step could take us to say that a concept is any abstract representation or, perhaps more restrictively, any linguistic abstract representation, regardless of what is represented to/by whom. I would like this third version the best, though it would also raise various philosophical issues. Luckily, the concept we are looking to clarify is “power”, and not “concept”, so that even an imperfect definition of the latter may here be sufficient. It may nevertheless be useful to spend a

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5. Cf. the definition by the *New Oxford American Dictionary*: “Concept [Philosophy]: an idea or mental picture of a group or class of objects formed by combining all their aspects.”

few more words on distinctions which, while not amounting to a complete definition, do help to understand the limited scope of conceptual analysis as here understood.

The most obvious, yet often ignored, distinction is that a conceptual study is not an empirical study. It is of course true that concepts are defined through linguistic uses – even though there rarely is a one-to-one correspondence between words and concepts – and the acts of talking and writing/reading have themselves to happen and be experienced, being thus empirical in a sense. I am fairly sympathetic to Wittgenstein's suggestion that “for a large class of cases of the employment of the word ‘meaning’ – though not for all – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”<sup>6</sup> Even a most radical interpretation of such statement, however, could not result in a purely empirical study of concepts, for logical normativity, at the very least, would always have a role to play.

For example, if linguistic use revealed inconsistencies or contradictions, we would be made aware that two or more concepts might be hidden under the same word, or perhaps that in certain cases there is no coherent concept to be had, but only a disorderly bunch of utterances without a clear meaning. Whatever “language” is, it entails some normative constraints, so that the very concept of a “use” that is specifically “linguistic” implies non-empirical elements. Boundaries may be fuzzy, but for a large class of cases we are well able to discriminate between linguistic uses that may contribute to define meanings, and utterances carrying no distinct significance. Howev-

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6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), § 43.

er difficult to make explicit, it is undoubtedly normative that words like “power” or “table” carry meanings, while “cromulent” or “xcdhd” do not.

Be as it may, even if the study of concepts by means of observing linguistic uses were to count as “empirical”, that would clearly still be a different application of the label from what is usual within the political and social studies constituting the horizon of discourses around power. Here we are primarily focusing on what we mean by “power”, not on the facts or phenomena in the world associated with the concept. Such phenomena, instead, are what mostly interested previous studies of power (even when explicitly labelled as conceptual); but empirical facts can be successfully enquired only if the more modest task of providing a clear conceptual definition has been completed. As we shall see in the first chapter, that is not the case at the moment, since no adequate definition of “power” is to be found in the extant literature. Remedying this absence is the main contribution, small but necessary to any subsequent enquiry, to be expected from the present work.

Another avenue to get to our point is to examine the distinction between concepts and conceptions. While the two terms are almost interchangeable in ordinary usage, and while the etymology would rather point toward the difference between an action and its product, within contemporary philosophy the distinction is most commonly understood as Rawls defined it. At the onset of *A Theory of Justice*,<sup>7</sup> Rawls employed a distinction between the “concept” of justice, representing the core meaning of the term, and a “conception” of it, denoting a set of opinions about

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7. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 5.

what precisely justice is, and what its principles would entail. People have different conceptions, of which Rawls' is one, and in this sense they disagree about what justice is; but they have (or may have) a single concept, thus agreeing about what justice is in the limited sense of recognizing how the various conceptions are all about the same concept. Even if everyone holding a conception will disagree with others, they will at least be able to recognize that their disagreement concerns justice, and not something else.

One way to bring Rawls' technical meaning closer to ordinary language would be to say that "conception" denotes the whole understanding, substantively richer and therefore extensionally narrower, of a more general and abstract notion, which would be the concept. If such an understanding is somewhat systematic, the conception may well be called a theory, so that we might say that our main object here is the concept of power, rather than a theory of power. This formulation would cover both normative and empirical specifications, for by "theory" we may mean either or both approaches. Thus, our focus on the concept of power can be distinguished from the currently more common discussions of different conceptions, which themselves are both empirical/descriptive (*e.g.* how power works and/or where to find it) and normative (*e.g.* does power corrupt?), or a mix of the two perspectives.

Working on a concept which is employed through very different points of view, we will straddle the line between approaches that may be seen as opposite to each other, and yet from the perspective of understanding power are equally problematic. This should be easy enough to comprehend, for if one starts from a concept that does not make sense, or includes contradictory

meanings, then specific substantive positions become secondary, for they will all be vitiated by being based on an inadequate understanding. The conceptions, or theories, of power held by Dahl, Lukes, Foucault, Habermas, *etc.*, are different or even opposite to each other, but if they all (though not all in the same way) take for the concept of power something that cannot be it – either because it is incoherent, circularly defined, or exceedingly removed from the ordinary meaning of the word – then from our perspective they will be criticizable on that same count, despite their diversity.

While our focus will thusly be on the concept of power as such, there still will be implications for the broader conceptions of it. These can be divided into negative and positive: limiting what a conception of power can be/do, and indicating some of the elements that a correct conception should include, respectively.

It must be clear from the start how it is impossible to draw rigorous inferences about how power actually “works” from a merely definitional enterprise. One cannot dispense advice as to how to acquire or better use power merely on the basis of a description of its meaning. However, the converse case is different, as it is well possible to establish a priori how power cannot “work”, or that some things and deeds cannot be achieved through it. This is so because even if the actual reality of anything cannot be asserted without empirical observations, the compossibility, or lack thereof, of different occurrences, instead, can. A properly conceptual definition establishes boundaries for what would count as power, and therefore if it can be shown that certain occurrences – regardless of their actual reality or consequences – could not correspond to the concept,

then certain options to acquire or enhance someone's power could indeed be ruled out a priori. Conceptual analysis cannot obviously serve to establish or demonstrate any reality, but it can still be used to delimit the space of what is logically compossible.<sup>8</sup>

The negative implications are thus properly logical, so that from observing that a concept has a certain meaning it follows that it cannot be studied or theorized about in certain ways (for example, whatever "justice" means, it is a normative concept, and thus it cannot be studied as if it were an empirical object). Thus, the fact that "power" is not the name of any object or phenomenon already implies that it cannot be the direct object of empirical studies. Likewise, the fact that power's meaning, as we shall see, refers to possibilities open before an actor, implies that both teleological and "de-subjectivized" theories may well be conceptions of something else, but not of power properly so called.

Positive implications are more tenuous, and cannot be thought of as established on a purely logical ground. Perhaps a basic understanding of a concept may suggest something about a fuller conception of it, especially by contrast with previous, incorrect, definitions. It is only on this basis that, in the last chapter, we will propose some positive conclusions, based on an Arendtean-phenomenological approach to the practical conditions for power to have any reality. It remains the case, however, that the meaning of a concept cannot determine anything by itself, having to be open to different perspectives to even be viable as a concept. A viability which consists in its apt-

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8. It should be noted that this takes no stand on the metaphysical status of logic as we know it. One could even entertain the idea that we could employ an entirely different logic, within which the idea of logical impossibility may perhaps not even make sense, *etc.* That would matter for the definition of power and its implication if and when such a logic becomes generally accepted, but not before.



ness to communicate ideas between people who will happen to differ from each other in their experiences, understandings, and goals – for otherwise, again, we would have a conception and not a concept.

In part, this is a matter of degrees, as the more specifications are added to a concept, the more it moves toward being a comprehensive conception. On the other hand, there remains a relevant difference in principle, in that our starting point will always be the observation of language as actually used, and not my goals for a general theory of power (whatever those might be, for at the moment I am not aware of any). In other words, even if we will in due course draw some broader consequences from our conceptual enquiry, the governing direction will always be from concept to conception, and never the reverse. It is, in fact, precisely the case of “power” that warns us against the perils of crafting our concepts instrumentally to our theories, as shown through the distortions produced by attempts to define “power” not according to its meaning, but rather according to the convenience of this or that theoretical framework.

## Why “power”?

From what precedes, it should be clear how the end, the for-the-sake-of-which of this work, is limited to achieving clarity about a concept. Such analytic work of course has further implications, for concepts inform nearly everything we do, and a concept as broad as “power” does so more than most. Over the course of this work, we will gradually move toward discussing some of these implications. This could serve as an inducement even for those who may not value concep-

tual clarity for its own sake – an astonishingly common stance, even in academic circles – but it should not be confused with the pursuit of goals in order to reach which the work would be constructed.

The most immediate consequences of a conceptualization of power concern the extant definitional debates, which we will be able to better understand, discriminating between those aspects which have been about power properly so called and those which have not. Two long-standing issues are particularly affected: the structure-agency and the “power-over” vs. “power-to” oppositions. With regard to the latter, while the priority of “power-to” should by now be uncontroversial,<sup>9</sup> a proper definition gains us a clearer appreciation of the distinction and relation between the two terms at a conceptual level. This is also related to the old structure-agency issue, for we will see how the reification of power-over (or domination) into structures conceptually detached from agents makes sense only insofar as the term is reduced to a form of causation, which may itself be implied by power properly so called but does not coincide with it.

Understanding the relation between power and causality – which is in many ways an opposition even while, under a sufficiently broad definition of causality, power is always also the power to cause effects – has broader implications for the discipline of political science which, as a whole, is more and more informed by a methodological quest for rigorous causal inferences. As we shall see, this focus on causality (and subordinately the operational substitution of probability in lieu of possibility) explains why contemporary political scientists, differently from a few decades ago, in-

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9. *Infra*, pp. 22, 30.

trinsically tend to marginalize the concept of power, or even to completely expel it from their horizon. This has troubling consequences for this science's most basic claim of being about politics.

The connection/opposition between power and causality derives from a more general one, often entirely disregarded, between power and potentiality. The retrieval and clarification of this difference – the origin of which can be traced back to Aristotle's momentous re-forming of *dynamis* into the concept we now know, through Latin, as “potentiality”<sup>10</sup> – governs the more substantive implications to be drawn from our conceptual analysis. In addition to being a superset of causality, in fact, potentiality implicitly informs the better part of philosophy's mis-appreciation of power, which is alternatively reduced to an inherently anti-normative concept or to a socio-historical force, teleologically oriented toward certain results. Both options, just like political science's exclusive fixation on causality, result in the forgetfulness of the category of possibility which, as we shall see at length, is integral to the meaning of power.

The relevance of all these, and more, implications of a conceptual definition hinges on the fact that we do, in fact, care for power, even if we are often unable to define it explicitly. This is so because power denotes a modality which is both basic and central to the human condition as we already experience it. Through this lens, the connection with Arendt's political theory and phenomenology becomes obvious.

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10. Although, as we shall see in the second chapter, Plato already had his own “teleologization” of *dynamis*.

My debts to Arendt are indeed too many and too great to be expounded here; suffice to say that, as far as I know, she has been the only one able to give an account of power as a truly radical – literally, going to the root – condition we may find ourselves into. In a sense, thus, the present work may perhaps contribute to make her thought, which has been subject to great misunderstandings, more intelligible even to those starting from different philosophical places. At the same time, this should not be read as an exegetical work: even when claims will be raised about the correct interpretation of Arendt's points, they will be intended to advance our conceptual analysis, and not for their own sake. Perhaps it would be better said that this work is indeed exegetical, but the object of exegesis is what we mean by “power”, and not Arendt (except, of course, insofar as she was one of many speakers of shared languages who talked and wrote about power); in any case, all claims regarding the latter will be meant in the service of the former.

Finally, it should be understood that all claims here raised are conditional upon the meaning of the concept which, whatever the underlying reality (if there is any), certainly is a linguistic artifact. Power does define a domain of human interactions in terms of recursively represented possibilities, as we will better understand through the present enquiry. Whether there is a corresponding metaphysical reality underlying such representations is beyond the scope of this conceptual analysis – and, perhaps, besides the point as well. For sure, we do think, write, talk and act around and about this domain, which is nothing else than politics, and a condition for all such activities to have any meaning is to be able to make sense of the concept of power.

## Chapters summary

The first chapter (*On extant definitions*) introduces the basic terms of conceptual analysis, informing the rest of the work, rejecting common instrumental or teleological approaches as unfit to capture a basic modal concept such as “power”. From there, the chapter proceeds to examine some of the most relevant previous attempts at defining power across political science, sociology, and philosophy, mainly focusing on the works of Dahl, Bachrach and Baratz, Lukes, Foucault, and Peter Morriss. These definitions (with the partial exception of Morriss’) have two main problems, both related to the incorrect presupposition that “power” denotes some sort of object, in that they are either circular (referring to the concept of power while purporting to define it) and/or so detached from the meaning of the concept within natural languages that they may scarcely be said to be about power. The chapter closes with a rebuttal of two common objections (here represented by Mark Haugaard), concerning circular definitions and conceptual pluralism, which, if they were not refuted as they shall be, would render moot the inquiry here pursued.

The second chapter (*The meaning of power*) spells out the proposed definition by examining both the form (*i.e.* what kind or type of concept “power” is) and the substantive meaning of power. Power (as referred to interactions amongst people) can preliminarily be defined as the status entertained by someone who objectively has possibilities available and subjectively perceive them as such. However, “objective” and “subjective” are not entirely appropriate terms. This is made clear by a deeper examination of the formal type of our concept, starting from the fact that it denotes a status, or condition, and not an object, which leads to consider Arendt’s phenomenologi-

cal approach as the most appropriate for our inquiry. This will allow us to understand the aforementioned definition in more precise terms of the possibilities represented to and by a person in the world. Having established that, the inquiry may proceed further into the semantics of the concept, substantiating the connection with the category of possibility, explaining how previous definitions can be subsumed as special cases of the one here presented, and introducing the crucial distinction between possibility and potentiality, which have been conflated by previous definitional attempts, and yet have to be distinguished in order to understand power. This distinction will thus be crucial, in the following chapters, to understand the consequences of the prevailing misconceptions of power.

The third chapter (*Power and political science: causality, probability, necessity*) examines the implication of understanding the concept of power for political science, particularly but not exclusively focusing on the conceptual underpinnings of quantitative approaches. Power has been equated to a form of causation (notably by Dahl, but going as far back as Hobbes' definition) which it is not, as already shown by Ball and Morriss – although of course having possibilities implies also the possibility of causing some effect. While such simple and explicit equivalence between power and causation is no longer as prevalent as it used to be, the focus on causality still contributes to obscure the understanding of our concept, especially through the use of probability, which is the governing concept in the attempt to objectify and tame the irregularity of politics. Probability may seem a close relative of possibility; however, by looking more accurately to its formal definitions as well as its philosophical interpretations and practical uses, we may see how it

rather falls within the conceptual domain of necessity. This is itself necessary, for otherwise probability would be useless to the endeavor of establishing causal connections, which is understood as the crux of political science. Thus, once the earlier confusion of power with causality was no longer tenable, the dominant strands of political science completed the expunction of the actual concept of power from their domain (for the most part implicitly), in so doing sacrificing the possibility to understand politics on the altar of causal explanations.

The fourth chapter (*Power and political theory: domination, normativity, teleology*) examines the implication of understanding the concept of power for political philosophy. If political science largely reduces possibility to necessity by employing probability to establish causality, theorists and philosophers show a parallel tendency to use normative teleologies to similarly keep the unpredictability of politics under control. This basically corresponds to a reduction of power/possibility to a potentiality with a pre-set end, which can take two main forms: the first is the imposition of teleology over history (as in Hegel or Marx), the second is the submission of politics to morality understood as striving for the achievement of some sort of value (as, perhaps paradoxically, in most contemporary liberals). The first kind, philosophy of history, is largely discredited, although its remnants are still present in contemporary political thought, especially amongst critical theorists. The second kind, politics as a branch of a teleologically oriented morality, is instead very prominent, particularly so in the Anglo-American world. Both tend to deny a role for power properly so called, and as such are not apt approaches for a theory or philosophy which purports to be political. At the same time, both ways of “teleologizing” power into a morally oriented po-

tentiality are for us hints of the conceptual relation between power and normativity, which has to be carefully spelled out.

Having made explicit the meaning of power, contrasted it with other basic modal concepts, and examined the critical implications for established ways of conceiving of politics, the fifth and final chapter (*Power and the space of appearances*) concludes by inquiring the conditions, both logical and pragmatic, for our concept to have an actual referent. Conceiving ourselves and the world under the rubric of power, as opposed to the various perspectives based on the category of necessity, is the basic condition to both understand and practice politics. Such condition is itself conditioned, as clearly there are situations in which we are unable to think in terms of power, act consequently, or both. We will thus analyze in some depth how it is possible to have power, and what may endanger its availability, forcing us back into a mode of necessity. The general conditions for power can be reduced to two: a language complex enough to allow the representation of possibilities and a system of law, representing the submission of the necessity of violence to a shared normative language. Both are normative in a way that is transcendently embedded into our condition as agents or actors, rather than grounded on any ulterior value or independent factual reality. Thus, upon reflection, a realistic appreciation of the fact that politics is always about power does not lead to the removal of normativity from politics, but rather to the recognition that power defines the radical condition of political norms. This is so independently from moral values, or any extrinsic teleological structure. Indeed, our very capacity to entertain ends, and judge of moral values, appears to be conditional upon the presence of power.



# 1. On extant definitions

Political and social scientists used to be very interested in obtaining a precise definition of power. Such an interest reached its height in the sixties and early seventies, but it ran through multiple generations of scholars. Thus, we may read that:

Power is central to modern political inquiry because, as Morgenthau says, "Without such a concept, a theory of politics [...] would be altogether impossible, for without it we could not distinguish between political and nonpolitical facts, nor could we bring at least a measure of systematic order to the political sphere."<sup>1</sup>

Morgenthau's assertion, itself a staple of classical realism, may be correct – I would argue that it is, albeit only for an adequate definition of power<sup>2</sup> – but, if it ever were recognized as a truism within “modern political inquiry”, it is not today. The debates that started at the very center of the

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1. Terence Ball, “Power, Causation & Explanation,” *Polity* 8, no. 2 (1975), 192.; quoting from: Hans Morgenthau, J., *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 4-5. A philosopher like Russell, writing in the thirties, could be even more sweeping: “... the fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics”: Bertrand Russell, *Power: A New Social Analysis* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

2. A definition Morgenthau was not willing to provide: Robert Jervis, “Hans Morgenthau, Realism, and the Scientific Study of International Politics,” *Social Research* 61, no. 4 (1994), 856-57.

discipline, then embodied by Robert Dahl,<sup>3</sup> gradually drifted toward the uncertain intersection of political theory, sociology, and philosophy. Thus, while it is true that discussions around the meaning of “power” continue after more than five decades,<sup>4</sup> they now happen mostly at the fringes, if not outside, of political science as commonly construed.<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, political scientists did not lose interest in either power or conceptual clarity. To the contrary, the various flavors of political realism are still holding to the contention that power is the key variable of politics,<sup>6</sup> while the growing dominance of formal modelling and quantitative approaches only increases the demand for precise definitions. However, the two tendencies do not overlap much anymore,<sup>7</sup> and what was once central is now relegated to the periphery of political

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3. Robert A. Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” *Behavioral Science* 2, no. 3 (1957); Robert A. Dahl, “Power,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences Vol. 12* (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

4. Mark Haugaard, ed. *Power: A Reader* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); Peter Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Stewart R. Clegg, and Mark Haugaard, eds. *The SAGE Handbook of Power* (London: SAGE, 2009); Keith Dowding, ed. *Encyclopedia of Power* (London: SAGE, 2011); Mark Haugaard, and Kevin Ryan, eds. *Political Power: The Development of the Field* (Opladen: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2012).

5. Whether it did exercise a direct influence, or merely represented the *Zeitgeist*, Ball’s work is paradigmatic. While seeking to open up the field to a richer conceptualization of power, not limited to mechanistic causality, Ball marks the time when mainstream political science mostly stopped caring for the topic: Ball, “Power, Causation & Explanation”; Terence Ball, “Models of Power: Past and Present,” *Journal of the History of Behavioral Sciences* 11, no. 3 (1975). It is true, however, that concerns about the uselessness of the concept of power had already been expressed in the previous decade, see: William H. Riker, “Some Ambiguities in the Notion of Power,” *American Political Science Review* 58, no. 2 (1964); James G. March, “The Power of Power,” in *Varieties of political theory*, ed. David Easton (Englewood Cliff NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

6. Although the generic way in which “power” used to be employed by classical realism has long come under strong criticism, see for example: David A. Baldwin, “Power Analysis and World Politics: New Trends versus Old Tendencies,” *World Politics* 31, no. 1 (1979); Stefano Guzzini, “The use and misuse of power analysis in international theory,” in *Power, Realism and Constructivism* (London: Routledge, 2013).

7. Within mainstream political science, International Relations is where discussions of power as such are relatively common, see for example: Michael Barnett, and Raymond Duvall, “Power in International Politics,” *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (2005); Felix Berenskoetter, and M. J. Williams, *Power in World Politics* (2008). It is no coincidence that IR is also the least formalized and least quantitative amongst the canonical sub-fields.

and social science,<sup>8</sup> while the mainstream appears mostly satisfied with either using the concept without defining it, or falling back onto older definitions, which happens to be more pliable to the dominant model of causal explanation than the labyrinthian debates developed afterwards.<sup>9</sup>

Thence, Bruno Latour was not being so “breezy”, after all, in suggesting that “the notion of power should be abandoned”.<sup>10</sup> If the aim of the social sciences is to provide causal explanations – and the very example of Latour shows that this is not limited to quantitative approaches,<sup>11</sup> the type preferred by mainstream political scientists – then it may well be true that they have no use for a meaningful concept of power. Once we get a grasp of a proper definition, in fact, it will become apparent why the pretension to reduce the study of politics to causal explanations is doomed to miss its object, despite all its epistemological refinements. The category of possibility, which is the core of the concept of power as we shall see throughout this dissertation, refers to a domain which cannot be entirely reduced to the causal framework underpinning social sciences’ enquiries, as we will discuss at length in our third chapter.

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8. Such as constructivist approaches: Stefano Guzzini, *Power, Realism and Constructivism* (London: Routledge, 2013). I do not mean this as a disparaging categorization. I am, in fact, more sympathetic toward these perspectives than toward strictly “positivistic” ones, though I am not satisfied with either’s use of the concept power.

9. This may be an instance of a more general dilemma: “faced with the difficulties of pinning down a concept, scholars decide to go for its more easily operationalizable aspects, but they thereby incur the risk of neglecting its most significant aspects, thus voiding the concept of the very significance for which it had been chosen in the first place”: Stefano Guzzini, “The concept of power: a constructivist analysis,” in *Power, Realism and Constructivism* (London: Routledge, 2013), 222.

10. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 62-63., quoting and commenting: Bruno Latour, “The Powers of Association,” in *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge?*, ed. John Law (London: Routledge, 1986), 278.

11. Constructivist critiques may question the limitation to strictly efficient causes, but not the commitment to causal explanations in general: Guzzini, *Power, Realism and Constructivism*, 6-7, 278-279. The relation between power and causality will be discussed at length in our third chapter.

Here, I would take Morgenthau's realism at its word when it claims that without considering power we would be unable to theorize about politics. However, we shall observe that a proper definition of power is nowhere to be found in contemporary political studies, be they empirical or normative,<sup>12</sup> chiefly because of two interrelated issues: the reification of the concept of power, and the prevailing image of concepts as "tools", built within a theoretical framework in order to enhance its capacity to produce empirical explanations, or to better advance its normative goals.

By "reification" here we mean simply the understanding of "power" as an object or thing, coherently with the mistaken identification of power as a social or political fact or phenomenon (rather than a condition, or modality, which it actually denotes, as we will better see in the next chapter). This is similar to the broad meaning entailed by the idea of a reification fallacy – *i.e* the making of an abstraction into a concrete object – although the error here is semantic, not purely logical. There is, however, also a connection with the richer Marxist meaning,<sup>13</sup> since the making of power into an independent object is a precondition for its de-personalization, which may easily lead to understand ourselves not as subjects *of* power, but merely as subject *to* it.

The idea of concepts as "tools" may superficially seem at the very opposite end of the spectrum, but it is actually related to reification in that by defining their concepts *ad hoc* the theorist submits language, and their own thinking along with it, to the ends or goals to be pursued. In so

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12. Of course my knowledge is very limited. However, I would be happy to exchange any pretension to originality for the recognition of the wider diffusion of the correct understanding of a concept, if that were the case.

13. Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1971); Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

doing, scholars alienate themselves from a shared semantic space in exchange for theoretical usefulness. The intersubjective perspective which is inherent to the consideration of ordinary language is thus substituted by the monologic determination of an end-oriented meaning, which is itself a form of objectification or reification.

Now, it remains true that concepts may be considered under various aspects, including their “toolness”, and maybe some of them could be entirely reduced to it. A sociologist could analyze how certain concepts respond to societal needs, and an historian could explain from such a functional perspective how they emerged and gained currency. A political scientist or a philosopher, on the other hand, could craft their own special, disciplinarily bounded, concepts, in order to better study an empirical phenomenon, or more persuasively advance their normative prescriptions. Such instrumental frameworks work fine for many concepts, or facets thereof, but they cannot be the whole story if our aim is to elucidate the meaning of basic modal concepts as they are used in ordinary languages which are, after all, our ultimate sources of meaning.

“Power” is one of such cases, because we are interested in understanding what “we” (speakers of natural languages) mean by the concept, not in crafting *ad hoc* definitions which would fit our scientific or philosophical theories – though they also are parts, if small, of language. Even if some concepts may have been artfully created for specific purposes (it seems exceedingly unlikely that such is the case for “power”, given the breadth of its meaning), once they are introduced into ordinary language, meaning accrues to them through innumerable uses which cannot be reduced to any single instrumentality. Constructing concepts “in order to” is not wrong or objectionable *per*

se, but it means to programmatically detach them from ordinary language, which is to say the context in which they would acquire the meaning that is to be enquired in cases such as “power”. This eliminates the possibility of thinking of the concept of power as a tool from the perspective of scholars crafting their own specialized disciplinary language.

We also have to exclude another instrumental way to look at concepts, *i.e.* defining them based on their usefulness in fulfilling social needs. In fact, while it would be interesting, if daunting, to inquire the historical and social causes for the concept of power coming to mean what it does – interestingly, modern European languages, as well as a few others, all seem to include an almost identical meaning<sup>14</sup> – that would presuppose an understanding of such current meaning. Obtaining an adequate definition is logically prior to the possibility of studying the socio-historical emergence of a concept, for otherwise we would have no means to individuate relevant instances, as the same or similar words may take to very different meanings. Moreover, such an enterprise would have nothing to say about the conditions to use the concept in a self-consistent way. It is in fact well possible for a concept defined by gradual accretion of different social interpretations to end up having no coherent meaning (eventually splitting into entirely different concepts).

Before moving to the positive task of reconstructing the meaning of the concept of power, it is necessary to examine in some detail how and why existing definitions fall short. The analysis has

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14. Raymond Aron influentially argued against this thesis, emphasizing how the difference between *puissance* and *pouvoir* did not map exactly onto the English and German usages, and how *puissance* was the most general term, and the one closer in meaning to power and *Macht*: Raymond Aron, “Macht, Power, Puissance: Democratic Prose or Demonic Poetry,” in *Politics and History* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 104-06. While it is true that “power” in English covers both *puissance* and *pouvoir*, saying that the former is generally closer to the English meaning is an error derived from a contrived linguistic analysis; see *infra*, p. 102.

to be conducted from an internal perspective – *i.e.* showing how these definitions do not make sense on their own terms, rather than criticizing them for failing to meet external validity criteria – since otherwise it would be impossible to evade the instrumental approach to conceptual definitions, which in the case of power has been so deleterious, as exemplified by the very failure of so many definitional attempts.

An external critique, in fact, would need to justify its own definition of power on the basis of an alternative theoretical framework, which itself could only be justified by the ends it would purport to achieve. Whether these ends were the same or similar to those pursued by extant theories – and therefore the argument had the purely instrumental form of showing how my version better achieves them – or radically different ones – which would entail a discussion of the value of those ends as well – the result would be to reproduce a dispute about power as a specialized concept within a disciplinary framework, weakening or losing the connection with its use in ordinary language which, absent some metaphysically external standpoint, is the only available source of general, if not always self-consistent, meaning.

Therefore, in criticizing the various definitions of power that have been offered, I will do my best to rely only on basic logic and the meaning of words in natural languages, while any further theoretical commitment introduced will have to be part of the same framework which, in each case, is being criticized. Only after the critique will have shown the lack of a meaningful conceptual definition of power, the belaboring needed to clarify an alternative, and then explore its im-

plications, will be justified by the desire to better understand what we are saying and doing when we talk about, and act around, power.

### 1.1. Dahl, circularity, and the operationalization of concepts

In 1957, Robert Dahl presented his influential definition of power, which informed the entire debate at least through the seventies, and is still widely cited today: “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do”.<sup>15</sup>

The most striking feature of this formulation is that, despite the explicit title of Dahl’s article, it cannot be a conceptual definition of any validity, since it uses the same concept it purports to define, thus being immediately circular. In this context, the word “can” is synonymous with “having the power to”,<sup>16</sup> and thus what the definition states – A has power over B to the extent that he has the power to get B to do ... – is that the presence of power can be logically induced from the observation of a specific instance of power. This says nothing on the meaning of the concept itself, which is presupposed but not in any way explained.

Before returning to this logical issue, common to very many definitional attempts, and in order to better understand its reasons and consequences, in this and the following section we shall more

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15. Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” 202-03.

16. The morphological divergence between the noun and the verb could partly explain the confusion – if not for William the Conqueror, you probably would have “may/might” just as Germans have *mögen/Macht*. That “power” is an “awkward word” in English had been duly noted by Dahl, though he did not ponder further on the relevance of the noun-verb correspondence, or lack thereof: *Ibid.*, 202. In any case, academic confusion is just as prevalent in languages that maintained the correspondence, such as Italian or French.



closely examine the context of Dahl's definition,<sup>17</sup> as well as the alternatives proposed by his critics.

Dahl's contribution is paradigmatic, on more than one level, for the subsequent debates. Historically, while far from being the first definitional attempt,<sup>18</sup> it marks the beginning of the most intense scrutiny of the concept, in terms of relative volume of publications and centrality to the discipline of political science. Theoretically, while not being particularly original, it well exemplifies a widespread circularity problem. Finally, on the meta-disciplinary level, Dahl's formulation is interesting simply because of its success within and outside specialistic debates. While it would hardly be accepted without modification by anyone engaged in discussing "power" (at least since the seventies), Dahl's definition still represents a *de facto* standard for most of those willing to talk about power without dwelling much on its meaning.<sup>19</sup>

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17. The preceding critique should already have clarified that Dahl's is not a "definition", in the sense of explaining the meaning of a concept. I will still label it, and those that share the same problem, in this way because it would be too cumbersome to do otherwise, given how the extant debates routinely treated them as if they were proper definitions.

18. E.g.: Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 152; Russell, *Power*, 23. See also, in the more immediate context of Dahl's own work: Harold D. Lasswell, and Abraham Kaplan, *Power and Society: A Framework for Political Inquiry* (New Brunswick NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2013), 74; Herbert A. Simon, "Notes on the observation and measurement of political power," *Journal of Politics* 15, no. 4 (1953).

19. E.g. Moises Naim, *The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being In Charge Isn't What It Used to Be* (2014), 16. Flatly asserting that the definition "is not controversial" is merely a scholarly failure but, on the other hand, it underscores how widespread Dahl's definition and its derivatives still are (incidentally, the substantive thesis of the book, despite the conceptual confusion, does showcase the decoupling of power from domination/control, in that one can be on top of a hierarchy without having much power properly so called, which we will discuss later). Possibly, the only other definition of power which may challenge the canonical status of Dahl's, though more outside the US and outside political science than within either, is the one provided by Max Weber, which we will discuss in our third chapter (*infra*, pp. 161-162).

While the privileged *locus* of power – at least according to realists, who have traditionally been more interested in the concept – had long been international politics, Dahl's definitional effort is embedded within the context of internal, and mostly urban, politics. As relentlessly made clear by the original 1957 article, the reason for seeking a formalized definition of power was to achieve quantifiability and, therefore, comparability amongst the powers held by different actors, and the main application of this method was soon to be the analysis of the distribution of power in the city of New Haven.<sup>20</sup> *Who Governs* was engaged in the so-called “community power debate”,<sup>21</sup> and more generally meant to buttress a pluralist view of American politics, against the “elitism” which had become influential after the war.<sup>22</sup>

While, here, we are not focusing on the substantive merits of Dahl's application of his own method, the aforementioned context is relevant to understand the degree of instrumentality in the proposed definition. “Power” is defined so as to yield a measurable and comparable quantity, and such measurability is constructed to test the pluralist hypothesis concerning the distribution of power in a democratic society. At the same time, we should be wary of completely reducing Dahl's “power” to an element within a specialized theory, since he was also interested in maintain-

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20. Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1961).

21. A long debate indeed, if increasingly peripheral to mainstream political science, see: Floyd Hunter, *Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision Makers* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1953); Douglas M. Fox, “Whither Community Power Studies,” *Polity* 3, no. 4 (1971); G. William Domhoff, *Who Really Rules?: New Haven and Community Power Reexamined* (New Brunswick NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1978); Robert J. Wast, ed. *Community Power: Directions for Future Research* (London: SAGE, 1986); Clarence N. Stone, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946-1988* (1989).

22. See especially: C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

ing a connection both to the ordinary meaning of power and to its significance as a practical phenomenon. In the conclusion of his original article,<sup>23</sup> in fact, the author donned the clothes of the “conceptual theoretician”, in an imaginary dialogue with the “operationalist” one,<sup>24</sup> defending, albeit still in terms of its scientific utility, the reference to a general concept of power against its dissolution into the particular powers which would be empirically observable.

We should here pause for a moment to consider the meaning of an “operational definition”<sup>m</sup> and the corresponding “operationalist theoretician” Dahl took as his foil. “Operationalism” would be the position according to which concepts, or at least scientific concepts, are defined by the means to measure them – or, we would say more precisely, to measure their referents. This position was classically formulated by the physicist Percy W. Bridgman,<sup>25</sup> although apparently he grew discontent with the excessive latitude his ideas were taken to by others.<sup>26</sup> The operations which gives the idea its moniker are chiefly operations of empirical measurement, although the extension of the idea to concepts without a material referent may be achieved by including verbal and symbolic operations.<sup>27</sup> Stated in the most general terms:

The fundamental idea back of an operational analysis is simple enough; namely that we do not

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23. Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” 214. See also: Dahl, “Power,” 414.

24. Who, I suspect, mostly represented James March, credited by Dahl as an important influence, see: James G. March, “Measurement concepts in the theory of influence,” *Journal of Politics* 19, no. 2 (1957); March, “The Power of Power.”

25. Percy W. Bridgman, *The Logic of Modern Physics* (New York: MacMillan, 1927), ch. 1.

26. Percy W. Bridgman, “The Present State of Operationalism,” in *The Validation of Scientific Theories*, ed. Philipp G. Frank (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954).

27. Which Bridgman dubbed “paper-and-pencil” operations, thus emphasizing once again their pragmatic aspect: Percy W. Bridgman, “The Nature of Some of Our Physical Concepts - I,” *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 1, no. 4 (1951), 258-59.

know the meaning of a concept unless we can specify the operations which were used by us or our neighbour in applying the concept in any concrete situation.<sup>28</sup>

Thus described, operationalism may seem to coincide with Wittgenstein's idea that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language".<sup>29</sup> However, for Bridgman the governing image remains that of a measuring instrument. Thus, even for concepts without a physical referent, only certain uses count to confer meaning in an operational sense, namely those directed at ascertaining the presence or absence, and the relative quantity, of any kind of phenomenon. Moreover, while the Wittgenstenian idea points toward one meaning being made up by an unbounded multiplicity of uses, a radically operationalist view would make each set of operations into a discrete concept. Thus, strictly speaking, the length we can measure with a stick would not be covered by the same concept as the one we can measure with a theodolite, or with beams of light:<sup>30</sup> using "the same name for these different concepts over the entire range is dictated only by considerations of convenience..."<sup>31</sup>

As a general theory of meaning, if it ever had been one, operationalism was already quite discredited when Dahl was writing, and by the early seventies it had become an historical relic, if an instructive one for the problems it attempted to tackle.<sup>32</sup> However, it remains true that many concepts referring to empirical objects and phenomena can be operationally defined, even if such a

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28. *Ibid.*, 257.

29. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 43.

30. Bridgman, *The Logic of Modern Physics*, 9-16.

31. *Ibid.*, 23.

32. Donald A. Gillies, "Operationalism," *Synthese* 25, no. 1/2 (1972).

definition is not necessarily complete and may depend on a preexisting non-operational meaning.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the operationalization of concepts may be seen as distinct from the question of their meaning:

Operationalization of concepts involves moving from the abstract to the empirical level. Social science researchers do not use this term as much as in the past, primarily because of the negative connotation associated with its use in certain contexts [...] as a consequence, few researchers define their concepts by how they are operationalized. Instead, nominal definitions are used as described above, and measurement of the concepts is viewed as a distinct and different activity. Researchers realize that measures do not perfectly capture concepts, although, as described below, the goal is to obtain measures that validly and reliably capture the concepts.<sup>34</sup>

Dahl prefigures this situation with his distinction between the “conceptual” and the “operational” level of analysis, although he was writing at a time when it made sense to express the preoccupation that a strong operationalism could dissolve the object of study into a multiplicity of incommensurable operational definitions. And even if this multiplicity were not conceptually threatening, there would still be an issue of correspondence between the operationalizations and the objects allegedly studied:

[...] the gap between concept and operational definition is generally very great, so great, indeed, that it is not always possible to see what relation there is between the operations and the abstract definition. Thus a critic is likely to conclude that the studies are, no doubt, reporting *something* in the real world, but he might question whether they are reporting the phenomena we mean when we speak of *power*.<sup>35</sup>

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33. Giovanni Sartori, “Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics,” *The American Political Science Review* 64, no. 4 (1970), 1045-46.

34. Charles W. Mueller, “Conceptualization, Operationalization, and Measurement,” in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods*, ed. Michael S. Lewis-Beck & Alan Bryman & Tim Futing Liao (Thousand Oaks CA: SAGE, 2004), 162. Incidentally, one might wonder whether the distinction between “perfectly” and “validly and reliably” might not be too subtle to be operationalized.

35. Dahl, “Power,” 414.

Dahl's admonition should always be heeded. While the distinction between the meaning of a concept and its operationalization may not be explicitly challenged anymore, political scientists are still overwhelmingly more interested in empirical measurements than in conceptual definitions.<sup>36</sup> In practice, the fact that operationalism is no longer explicitly held as a theory of meaning does not prevent operational definitions from taking over the ordinary meaning of the concepts involved.<sup>37</sup> Even within careful methodological statements, indeed, the fact that operationalization directly leads to empirical measurement makes it the crown jewel of all the conceptual work it may have been preceded by. Thus, for example:

Measurement might be regarded as the analysis phase of description. It is here where the researcher makes contact with empirical reality (one hopes). It is here that concepts [...], and the larger descriptive arguments they sit within [...] are operationalized. [...] The critical question, in any case, is how we recognize a concept when we see it. Can democracy be distinguished from autocracy? Can power be distinguished from powerlessness? What do these concepts mean empirically?<sup>38</sup>

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36. From this point of view, it does not make much of a difference whether one adopts a quantitative or qualitative approach, insofar as both share the goal of drawing causal inferences about empirical phenomena, see *infra*, § 3.1.

37. Thus, a book ostensibly about “party government” operationalizes both “party” (reduced to the observation of the intra-legislative behavior of its elected members) and “government” (reduced to the House of Representatives, and then further stripped of its peculiarities, including the fact that it is not a governing entity but one branch of a bicameral legislative body) in a way which has very little to do with what they actually are, according both to ordinary language and their own institutional structure: Gary W. Cox, and Mathew D. McCubbins, *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the U.S. House of Representatives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). For another example, Bartels’ influential work on economic and political inequality relies on the concepts of “working class” (arbitrarily made synonymous with “low income”), “middle class”, and “high income”, each neatly corresponding to one third of the income distribution (except when they don’t, and the rich become the 5%, the 1%, the 0.1% or the 0.01%) in a way that has little to do with the ordinary use of these terms: Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).. This is particularly troubling in view of the obvious force of concepts such as “middle class” in actual politics’ rhetoric.

38. John Gerring, *Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 156. Incidentally, it should be noted that nobody, save perhaps Plato, has ever “seen”, and much the less “measured”, a concept. Such categorial mistakes, common in political science methodological discourse, could be innocuously sloppy when talking about the concepts of objects or events, but are more troubling when the concept does not refer to anything material, as it is the case for power.

Political scientists should take Dahl's advice, and be cautious in presuming that empirical operationalizations can coincide with, or substitute for, the meaning of the concepts referring to the phenomena they want to study. In the case of power, however, Dahl may not have perfectly followed his own instructions. Looking at the "conceptual" definition presented in the beginning, we may see how it is itself operational, albeit at a quite general level. As we noted, what the definition says is that the presence of power can be induced by observing a specific instance of it,<sup>39</sup> which is already an operational criterion even if the "measure" it produces is very crude: either there is power or there is not. A defective execution, however, should not devalue the intention to appreciate the relevance of conceptual definitions and their distinctiveness.

This tension may also help to explain why Dahl has been so central to the definitional debate, as he tried to represent at once the interest of the empirical scientist and of the theorist looking for generalizable definitions. The ensuing discussion was in many ways shaped by this tension,<sup>40</sup> and ultimately torn apart by it, leading to the aforementioned situation in which empirical social

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39. Thus, while it is true that many amongst Dahl's readers did not heed the distinction he stipulated between his general definitions and its diverse operationalizations, it is exceedingly charitable to say that Dahl consistently employed a clear distinction between them: David A. Baldwin, "Misinterpreting Dahl on power," *Journal of Political Power* 8, no. 2 (2015).

40. The "second" and "third" faces, or dimensions, of power, which largely defined the early debate, were explicitly constructed to remedy the perceived incapacity of Dahl operational definition to capture the realities of power: Peter Bachrach, and Morton S. Baratz, "Two Faces of Power," *The American Political Science Review* 56, no. 4 (1962); Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London, New York: Plagrave Macmillian, 1974). Later on, the critique could no longer have been posed in the same terms because, for the prevailing mindset of political science, phenomena had become indistinguishable from the conditions of their empirical observation. In other words, ultimately the "operationalists" won the day. Symptomatically, Dahl's own profile was closer to a political theorist than an empirical scientist in the later part of his life, see for example: Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1991); Robert A. Dahl, *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002).

scientists are no longer very interested in power as such,<sup>41</sup> while theorists of various stripes continue to engage in an increasingly peripheral discussion. Even before being fractured by the tension between empirical and conceptual instances, however, the debate had already showed itself unable to produce a viable definition.

The focus, in fact, remained overwhelmingly on the operational question of appropriately detecting the presence of power, rather than on its conceptual definition.<sup>42</sup> This is understandable, given how influentially Dahl had equivocated between a proper definition and a criterion for empirical induction. Nevertheless, criticizing one's observational strategy for its inadequacy in detecting the actual "thing" presupposes a clear understanding of what the "thing" is, which is not anywhere provided (though we shall better see later how the conceptualization of "power" as a thing, or object, is itself part of the problem). To see how this has been the case, in the next section we are going to follow the debate about the "three dimensions", or "faces", of power, later expanded to four,<sup>43</sup> largely following Steven Lukes' rendering of it.<sup>44</sup>

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41. A fact decried by those few that still are: Paul R. Brass, "Foucault Steals Political Science," *Annual Review of Political Science* 3 (2000).

42. As Lukes put it later, the debate was "about an interesting question: how to think about power theoretically and how to study it empirically": Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 1. Neither, however, amount to defining the concept itself. Even more strikingly, in the very beginning of the original essay: "I shall argue for a view of power (*that is, a way of identifying it*)...": *Ibid.*, 14, *emphasis mine*.

43. Peter Digeser, "The Fourth Face of Power," *The Journal of Politics* 54, no. 4 (1992).

44. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*. Lukes first published his famous essay in 1974, but all page references will henceforth be to the edition of 2005, which includes the original alongside an introduction and two new chapters. It is worth noting that Lukes' intervention shifted the debate in a more theoretical direction, which here is most relevant but does not necessarily correspond to the debate's perspective up to that point: Jonathan Hearn, *Theorizing Power* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), ch.4.



## 1.2. Lukes and the many faces of power

According to Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz,<sup>45</sup> the main problem with Dahl's definition was that it allowed one to identify power only when visibly exercised – later labelled as “exercise fallacy”.<sup>46</sup> But power needs not be visible to be effective: powerful actors may exclude some outcomes without openly displaying their power. The ability to covertly shape the agenda is the key example of the second face of power, and it may be available as the result of being in a dominant position, with no need to take directly observable actions.

Bachrach's and Baratz's critique shares the same motives of its polemical foil. “Power” is once again operationalized within a doubly instrumental framework: the definition is constructed to detect certain phenomena, and the detection of these phenomena buttresses a more general diagnosis of the state of American politics. On both counts Bachrach's and Baratz's goals were opposed to Dahl's, but the structure of their definition is equally instrumental. As the label itself suggests, the “second face” of power is meant to complement Dahl's “first”, and as such has to be played on the same logical level: operational, not properly definitional.

The idea of studying “non-decisions”, alongside the stipulative and somewhat opaque style of the authors, did not fly well, to say the least, with many political scientists.<sup>47</sup> The acrimony of the

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45. Bachrach, and Baratz, “Two Faces of Power”; Bachrach Peter, and Morton S. Baratz, “Decisions and Nondecisions: An Analytical Framework,” *The American Political Science Review* 57, no. 3 (1963).

46. Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, 3.2; Dowding, *Encyclopedia of Power*, 229-30.

47. See for example: Richard M. Merelman, “On the Neo-Elitist Critique of Community Power,” *The American Political Science Review* 62, no. 2 (1968); Raymond E. Wolfinger, “Nondecisions and the Study of Local Politics,” *The American Political Science Review* 65, no. 4 (1971); Geoffrey Debnam, “Nondecisions and Power: The Two Faces of Bachrach and Baratz,” *The American Political Science Review* 69, no. 3 (1975). Indeed, some reviews from outside the

methodological dispute,<sup>48</sup> however, should not blind us to the problems shared by the “definitions” underpinning it. As a matter of fact, Bachrach and Baratz did not even question that A had power over B to the extent that A had the power to make B do something they would not otherwise do; they merely denied that this “power-over” could be fully detected by observations limited to visible actions and explicit decisions.

This “second face”, in any case, was not radical enough in breaking away from Dahl’s behaviorist assumptions, at least according to Steven Lukes,<sup>49</sup> who found a “third dimension” of power in the shaping of the perception of available options, hiding the true interests of the dominated even to themselves. Such a systemic distortion would not be analyzable in terms of behaviorism or methodological individualism, and not even cognizable without presupposing wide-ranging counterfactual conditions.<sup>50</sup> This kind of power used to be labelled “ideology” or “false consciousness”, but Lukes had to be cautious in employing such terms, though he eventually owned them,<sup>51</sup> because of their Marxist undertones. Despite the attempt to make them coherent with an empiri-

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discipline were just as scathing, so that “if *Power and poverty* is where political science is then political anthropology is in excellent shape”: Lincoln R. Keiser, “Review: Power and Poverty: Theory and Practice. by Peter Bachrach, Morton S. Baratz,” *Man* 7, no. 3 (1972), 517.

48. E.g. “[...] they have been unable to attempt a more coherent justification of their position. That such is necessary should be apparent from their lament that “yet another competent scholar” has failed to appreciate their argument. They try to resolve the problem [...] by attributing it to my “slovenly reading and analysis”, as they describe it. But it may well be time for them to consider the possibility that there are serious difficulties in their theoretical work”: Geoffrey Debnam, “Rejoinder to “Comment” by Bachrach and Baratz,” *American Political Science Review* 69, no. 3 (1975), 907.

49. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 25 ff.

50. *Ibid.*, 144-50.

51. *Ibid.*, 7-9, 13, 145-151.

cally testable research agenda, these points were indeed to be the focus of strong critiques against Lukes' approach.<sup>52</sup>

In defending his use of "real interests", however, Lukes made the important point that he was not alone in using counterfactual conditions to individuate power, given how the reference to the equally unobservable "something that B would not otherwise do" was already embedded in Dahl's definition.<sup>53</sup> Lukes' point concerning counterfactuals may not dispel the objections against the use of "real interests" or "false consciousness", which are also liable to the normative critique of being paternalist,<sup>54</sup> but it brought attention to the inherently "potential" (though we shall later see how this may not be the best word to use) character of power. This is related with the recognition of the "exercise fallacy",<sup>55</sup> meaning that power itself should not be confused with its exercise, and may be read as our first hint that power is not a "thing" or a "phenomenon" at all, as we will better see later (*infra*, §2.1).<sup>56</sup>

Despite its innovations and the polemics against mainstream political science's assumptions, Lukes' contribution again fails to provide a viable conceptual definition of power. The *Radical*

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52. E.g. Alan Bradshaw, "A Critique of Steven Lukes' 'Power a Radical View,'" *Sociology* 10, no. 1 (1976); Alvin Goldman, "Review: Steven Lukes, 'Power: A Radical View,'" *Theory and Decision* 8, no. 3 (1977); R. A. Young, "Review: Steven Lukes's Radical View of Power," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 11, no. 3 (1978).

53. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 44-50.

54. Lukes' answer to the objections is not entirely convincing, as it indicates the possibility of assessing "false consciousness" without paternalism, but does not really show a way of doing so: *Ibid.*, 144 ff.

55. Which, however, Lukes later judged to have committed himself: *Ibid.*, 109.

56. It should be added, though, that everything hinges on the exact meaning of "phenomenon", see: *infra*, p. 76. In the present context, we are understanding the concept as coextensive with empirical facts, as it is most commonly intended by social and political scientists.

*View*, in fact, is still embedded within the instrumental interest in individuating the presence of power, rather than defining its concept, as explicitly stated from the very beginning:

This chapter presents a conceptual analysis of power. In it I shall argue for a view of power (*that is, a way of identifying it*) [...] I shall try to show why this view is superior to alternative views. I shall further defend its evaluative and contested character as no defect, and I shall argue that it is 'operational', that is, empirically useful in that hypotheses can be framed in terms of it that are in principle verifiable and falsifiable (despite currently canvassed arguments to the contrary).<sup>57</sup>

And moreover:

I shall try to show, with examples, that the third view allows one to give a deeper and more satisfactory analysis of power relations than either of the other two.<sup>58</sup>

Lukes' definition is different from Dahl's or Bachrach's and Baratz's, but it tries to achieve the same goal, which is to operationalize a criterion for the individuation of power. Indeed, Lukes explicitly considers all "three dimensions" as referring to the same "power":

The three views we have been considering can be seen as alternative interpretations and applications of one and the same underlying concept of power, according to which A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests.<sup>59</sup>

Incidentally, this formulation removes the circularity observed in Dahl's, although it does so in a way that conflicts both with the ordinary meaning of the concept and with Lukes' own assumptions. Despite the aforementioned reference to the "potential" character of power, here we do not have anything indicating that A may or may not exercise their power over B. To the contrary, part

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57. *Ibid.*, 14. Emphasis added.

58. *Ibid.*, 16.

59. *Ibid.*, 30.

of Lukes' "radicalness" is in emphasizing the structural aspects of domination, not only downplaying the subjective perception of B's own interest, but also to some extent the subjectivity of the dominant agent.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, to use an example which is close to our contemporary preoccupations, the privileges accruing to people "who believe they are white",<sup>61</sup> and the corresponding disadvantages suffered by those who do not, would count as an instance of power in Lukes' sense, given the many contexts in which the mere existence of a privileged white person may negatively affect the interests of a non-white one – a common example could be hiring and/or pay discrimination. In many ways, this and similar cases may conform to a common, even paradigmatic, use of the term "power". It is well conceivable that racists invoking "white power", as well as radicals of various stripes eager to "fight the power",<sup>62</sup> may have in mind something like the preservation, or destruction, of such systematic privileges and correlated oppressions.

There are, however, two main problems in taking something like Lukes' as a definition of power, even in operational terms. The first is that such a formulation refers only to the instances in which someone's power bears over someone else; here with the further specification that the power must also be against the real interests of those subjected to it. This is much too limited to cover

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60. Concerning the tension between an agent-centered and a structural view of power in Lukes, see: Mark Haugaard, "Sociological Versus Moral Lukes: Reflections upon the Second Edition of *Power: A Radical View*," *Journal of Power* 1, no. 1 (2008); Clairissa R. Hayward, and Steven Lukes, "Nobody to Shoot? Power, Structure and Agency: A Dialogue," *Journal of Power* 1, no. 1 (2008). We will discuss the conceptual reification of power more at length in chapter 4.

61. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

62. To be fair, both *The Isley Brothers'* (1975) and the *Public Enemy's* (1989) songs by the same title make reference to the quite more specific "power that be" in their actual texts.

the ordinary meaning of power.<sup>63</sup> On the one hand, it is plain that someone can exercise power over someone else even in their own interest: if I have the power to compel you to do  $x$ , then by definition I do have such power, even if  $x$  happens to be in your interest.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, against the whole family of “power-over” definitions, it is also possible to have the power to do or not do something, without such power being necessarily exercised “over” someone else: I have the power to stand up and take a walk, and we may have the power to cooperate in order to achieve a goal which may or may not entail control or coercion over other people. Lukes himself recognized how the “power-over”, or more specifically the “the securing of compliance to domination”,<sup>65</sup> he was discussing covered only a subset of power in general, if an especially significant one.<sup>66</sup>

Secondly, Lukes’ operational definition is also too broad, as it would cover instances in which no one had any power to do, or not to do, something about the situation. Going back to our example, there may be cases in which exercising their privileges, or not, is within the power of the relevant white person, but there may also be cases in which the enjoyment of such privileges is unavoidable, regardless of what they may want or do. Thus, for example, one may be chosen for a job over someone else because of their ascribed race, without doing anything about it, possibly regardless of whatever they might have done, and even without being aware of such preferential

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63. Robert A. Dahl, and Bruce Stinebrickner, *Modern Political Analysis* (2002), 15.

64. Cf. Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1979), 90.

65. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 64, 109.

66. *Ibid.*, 69-74.

treatment – the fact that their own privilege might be invisible to the privileged themselves, indeed, may be one of the most insidious effects of the ideological domination discussed by Lukes.

Here, the white person, merely by being present in the given context, would be affecting someone else in a manner contrary to their interests, but would it make sense to say that such person has the power to so affect, even if, *ex hypothesi*, they do not have the power to do anything about a situation they are not even aware of?<sup>67</sup> Even if it did make sense to speak in such a way – using the same word with two meanings that are not just different, but even opposite to each other – it would still be in contradiction with Lukes’ observation of the potential character of power. Where would the “potential” be if the privileges were not something the white person could employ, or not, but rather unfailingly *in actu*, and the one enjoying them could not do anything about that?<sup>68</sup>

Of course, due to their privileges, white people likely would, *ceteris paribus*, have more power than people of color. Thus, the one white man who is oblivious to his privilege would enjoy the power of acting in various ways, precluded to those in a less privileged position, and he would be aware of those actions being available to him (otherwise they would not properly be in his power),<sup>69</sup> even if he omits to fully consider the conditions necessary for him to have such powers.

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67. The notion of “systemic power” is in this sense ambiguous, for it may refer to something which is within the power of someone, whereas in other cases it will refer to effects which will be there regardless of what people, including the dominant ones, may decide to do, and even without their awareness. Cf.: Clarence N. Stone, “Systemic Power in Community Decision Making: A Restatement of Stratification Theory,” *The American Political Science Review* 74, no. 4 (1980); Dowding, *Encyclopedia of Power*, 655-56.

68. Certainly, other people, like those giving or denying the job in our example, would have power in the ordinary sense (assuming that they were not themselves constrained to act in a certain way); but Lukes’ operationalization does not discriminate between those that have a choice and those that do not.

69. As we will discuss at length in the next chapter, power is better defined through to the representations of possibilities available to an actor. To be in a condition of power, one has to represent possibilities open before themselves;

None of this, though is the same as identifying the dominant position with power itself. Doing so would constitute a “vehicle fallacy” (*i.e.* the confusion of power with the means of power),<sup>70</sup> it would be the same kind of error as conflating material wealth with power just because the rich tend to be more powerful than the poor.

Indeed, in the re-elaboration of his earlier work, immediately after having recognized that the “power-over” he was talking about was a subset of a more general “power-to”,<sup>71</sup> Lukes himself formulates another definition, as an extension of the one given by Locke,<sup>72</sup> which does resemble more closely the ordinary meaning of power, but which exhibits the same circularity already observed in Dahl’s attempt: “[...] having power is being able to make or to receive any change, or to resist it.”<sup>73</sup> The reference to any kind of change, as opposed to the specific modification of someone’s else behavior, generalizes this definition beyond the boundaries of “power-over”, but just as “can” was for Dahl, here “being able to” is equivalent to “having the power to”, and therefore the definition is still circular: having power is having the power to make or to receive...

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this does not preclude, however, being unaware of the background conditions – such as systemic racism – which may make those possibilities available in the first place.

70. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 70.

71. There is, indeed, still some confusion as “power-over” and “domination” may not be synonymous and the latter concept, as employed by Lukes, represent an actuality and not a potential. Thus, it can be observed that even on his own revised terms Lukes may not be talking about power at all: Peter Morriss, “Steven Lukes on the Concept of Power,” *Political Studies Review* 4, no. 2 (2006). We will return later on the distinction between power and domination.

72. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Book 2, Ch. XXI.

73. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 69.



The tendency to detach power from actors and intentionality has been further developed in the “fourth face of power”, or the “ultra-radical view”, as Lukes dubbed it.<sup>74</sup> Largely inspired by the works of Michel Foucault, but more broadly susceptible to structuralist influences,<sup>75</sup> this view would see power not as the property of independently existing individuals, but rather as inherent in the relations society is made of, something which constitutes the subjects themselves, at once structuring their interactions.<sup>76</sup> Thus, for example, it might not be entirely correct to say that the master has power over the slave, that the former is free and the latter not; rather, both would be within the “network” of power,<sup>77</sup> which constitutes their subjectivities as well as those of everyone else. Perhaps, power does not need to have a face, after all.<sup>78</sup>

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74. *Ibid.*, 88-106.

75. The kind of power most talked about by “Foucauldian” authors is often a structural power, largely divorced from individual agency. This creates hermeneutical problems, because Foucault himself did not, save perhaps in his earliest works, adhere to structuralism properly so called. See: Neil Brenner, “Foucault’s New Functionalism,” *Theory and Society* 23, no. 5 (1994); Christian Borch, “Systemic Power: Luhmann, Foucault, and Analytics of Power,” *Acta sociologica* 48, no. 2 (2005).

76. The interpretation of Foucault’s “power” is of course contentious, and the various theorists have themselves many things to add or develop, but for an overview see: Digeser, “The Fourth Face of Power”; Brass, “Foucault Steals Political Science”; Nathan Widder, “Foucault and Power Revisited,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 3, no. 4 (2004); Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Magnus Hörnqvist, *Risk, Power and the State: After Foucault* (New York: Routledge-Cavendish, 2010).

77. “Power is co-extensive with the social body; there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of its network”: Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 142.

78. Clarissa R. Hayward, *De-Facing Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). It is notable that within Hayward’s study, what “power” chiefly does is to make everyone relatively powerless including the actors usually deemed “powerful”: *Ibid.*, 5, 10-12, 30-34, 38-39, 51-53, 64. While the empirical study of how social relations structure and limit the possibilities available to different people is certainly important, it is unclear what is gained by using “power” to refer to the set of social relations that function as boundaries which both creates and limits power. We could call the boundaries and the enclosed space by the same name, if we so wished, but we should remain aware that “wall” and “room” are two different concepts.

This kind of diffused social control could be understood with a strong emphasis on domination and the obliteration of freedom;<sup>79</sup> more recently, since the late Foucault has been digested by the secondary literature, the creative and productive aspects of such an holistic “power” have often been stressed.<sup>80</sup> Concerning such “ultra-radical” positions, we could follow Lukes in noting that, when their claims are taken seriously, they result in so wide an extension of the meaning of “power” that it would cover most, or even all, social relationships.<sup>81</sup> Therefore, the resulting concept would neither be useful as an analytical tool nor particularly radical.<sup>82</sup> However, we do not need to take side in the dispute, since it clearly is not about different conceptual definitions, but rather concerned with an empirical assessment of how social relations work and whether, or on what conditions, there is space for freedom and autonomous individualities within them.

If we look at Foucault’s actual words on power, we can see that his propositions are overwhelmingly about empirical facts, usually situated within their concrete histories as specific ways

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79. Cf. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (New York: Routledge, 2006). While denying a direct influence, Foucault recognized how he had been interested by the same topics raised earlier by the Frankfurt School: Michel Foucault, and Duccio Trombadori, *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), 115-20. See also: Thomas McCarthy, “The Critique of Impure Reason: Foucault and the Frankfurt School,” *Political Theory* 18, no. 3 (1990); Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1991).

80. E.g. Kevin Jon Heller, “Power, Subjectification and Resistance in Foucault,” *SubStance* 25, no. 1 (1996); Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*; Hörnqvist, *Risk, Power and the State: After Foucault*.

81. Cf. Michel Foucault, “The ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom,” in *The Final Foucault*, ed. James Bernauer, and David Rasmussen (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1988), 3.

82. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 97-98.

of understanding and employing power,<sup>83</sup> even if they may be outside of the prevailing methods of empirical social research. Thus, for example, one of Foucault's most cited passages...

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always "inside" power, there is no "escaping" it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned, because one is subject to the law in any case? Or that, history being the ruse of reason, power is the ruse of history, always emerging the winner? This would be to misunderstand the strictly relational character of power relationships. Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network.<sup>84</sup>

... is composed of a series of empirical, not definitional, propositions about its object. According to Foucault, power is always accompanied by resistance, which is a factual statement. Furthermore, power relationships are "strictly relational", not just by definition but because their "existence" is said to depend on resistance, which is another factual assertion. One may criticize the apodeictic rhetoric of such broad statements,<sup>85</sup> but, right or wrong, empirical statements they remain.

To contemporary social and political scientists, it may sound strange to call this debate "empirical", as opposed to conceptual, because of the absence of a shared methodological ground and of the presence of normative elements; but that is what it was, since the actual point of contention

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83. Indeed, it is most often "this power" that Foucault wrote about, not "power" in general, e.g.: Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1995), 26-27, 78, 101, 214, 305; Michel Foucault, *Lectures on the Will to Know: Lectures at the Collège de France 1970-1971 and Oedipal Knowledge* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 140, 190, 244; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 45-47, 85, 135-139.

84. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol.1*, 95.

85. Notably, the late Foucault was no longer so sure about his earlier uses of "power", see: Foucault, "The ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom."

between “radicals” and “ultra-radicals”, has been how certain phenomena happen, not the definition of a concept.

Foucault himself spent practically his entire intellectual life conducting historical enquiries and emphasizing the concreteness of the particular, not analyzing concepts or theorizing about them in general. The fact that much of the debate has been conducted in rhetorically charged terms, rather than through the rigorously controlled, mostly quantitative, induction typical of contemporary political science, should not blind us the fact that the claims raised – if perhaps inappropriately defended – were not conceptual but empirical. As in the other debates we have observed, here too the focus is on how power works (or has worked through history), while a proper conceptual definition has scarcely been attempted.

All the positions in the debates – as well as others we cannot examine in detail<sup>86</sup> – proposed different operational definitions, geared toward measuring power, possibly failing at that,<sup>87</sup> or understanding how it works, not toward defining the concept. To Lukes’ question: “What interests us when we are interested in power?”<sup>88</sup> the prevailing answer has not been “its concept”. Instead, “what is power?” has been understood to mean “which phenomena are instances of power (and how do they work)?” Accordingly, the disagreement between pluralists and radicals lays in empir-

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86. For example, Clegg’s reconstruction gives ample space to structuralist and post-structuralist theories: Stewart R. Clegg, *Frameworks of Power* (London: SAGE, 1989). Such a wider perspective raises many questions around the study of power, but not about the concept itself. There is, instead, the familiar interest in power’s empirical manifestations, or ways of working. Clegg gives his own answer (power works like a circuit) but does not discuss the concept to which all the questions refer.

87. Jeffrey C. Isaac, “Beyond the Three Faces of Power: A Realist Critique,” *Polity* 20, no. 1 (1987), 19-21.

88. Steven Lukes, “Introduction,” in *Power*, ed. Steven Lukes (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 17.

ical questions: who are the powerful? How is their power exercised? How could the powerless be empowered (without lapsing into paternalism)? “Ultra-radical” views may further question the very possibility of achieving freedom and autonomy, since “power is everywhere”,<sup>89</sup> possibly opening new spaces for empirical and historical enquiries, but not really confronting the lack of a proper definition.

These and many other related issues are undoubtedly important. More important, in fact, than the modest task of defining a concept. But possessing a clear concept is a necessary presupposition to rationally conduct substantive enquiries – including those that may turn out not to be about power, after all – and such clarity can be achieved only through an adequate definition.

### 1.3. The structure of the definition and its circularity

Having gone through the debates elicited by Dahl’s proposal to operationalize power, we may pause for a moment to observe that most definitions – which, because of their operational character, have actually been condensed empirical theories – are made of three basic components:

1. the circular “power is the power to ...”
2. the reference to an agent having power “A”
3. the reference to the exercise of A’s power over one or more subjects “B”

These three elements can have further specifications – for example with Lukes’ contention that the power bearing over B counted as such only when against their interests – or they may assume

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89. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. Vol.1, 93.

a “null” value, as in the case of the “de-subjectification” or “de-facing” of power pursued by some Foucauldian authors, erasing the reference to agents exercising power. The first element is the most central, but even it can be annulled. This would remove the circularity problem, albeit at the price of ascribing power to actors who may have no power to do (or refrain from doing) anything at all, as we have seen with Lukes.<sup>90</sup>

Thus, what remains common to all the observed definitions, up to the point they cease to be about power, is that power is equated with some more specific “power to...”. When this specificity grows broader, as in Lukes’ Locke-inspired redefinition,<sup>91</sup> it may become so general as to approach the limit at which the definition would collapse into “power is power”.

We shall return to the significance of the circularity in a moment, but first we should dwell a little more on the meaning of the generic formulation. First, the equivalence between “can/being able” and “having the power to” is useful not only to expose the circularity, but also as the shortest way to show the dependence of “power-over” on the broader concept of “power-to”. The point has been stated as clearly as ever by Peter Morriss,<sup>92</sup> and should by now be quite settled, though it has been a matter of contention for a long time.<sup>93</sup>

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90. *Supra*, p. 20.

91. *Supra*, p. 24.

92. Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, § 5.3. See also: Isaac, “Beyond the Three Faces of Power: A Realist Critique.” A forerunner of this argument is: Hanna F. Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1972), 276-77.

93. Most starkly in Lukes’ original account (1974), against what he then saw as Parsons’ and Arendt’s positions: Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 30-34. As already noted, he later accepted the conceptual priority of “power-to”: *Ibid.*, 69-74.

More recently, a related confusion has emerged around the tripartite conceptualization, often employed by feminist theorists, of “power over”, “power to” and “power with”.<sup>94</sup> These terms, despite the laudably cautious way in which they were (re)introduced by Amy Allen,<sup>95</sup> have been interpreted as if they represented alternative courses of actions and/or factual conditions, often with moralistic overtones.<sup>96</sup> This would be all well if the aim were to pass normative judgments about concrete instances of power, but it should be kept separate from the analysis of the concept which is, once again, presupposed but not expounded.

From a conceptual perspective, there is only one overarching notion of power, which is always a “power to”, regardless of its being over someone, with someone, or of its normative significance in any given case. This is not an empirical or philosophical contention, but rather a humble grammatical one:<sup>97</sup> if your power over/with/from-whatever-source-you-want is not the power *to* do (or *to* abstain from doing) something, the power *to* achieve something, then it is not power at all.

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94. The original use of the locution “power-with” seems to have been in the 1925 paper: Mary P. Follett, “Power,” in *Dynamic Administration: The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett*, ed. Henry C. Metcalf, and L. Urwick (New York: Routledge, 2003).

95. “Although power-to is perhaps the most basic of the three senses I have delineated, it is not opposed to either power-over or power-with. ... Power-over, power-to, and power-with are not best understood as distinct types or forms of power; rather, they represent analytically distinguishable features of a situation”: Amy Allen, “Rethinking Power,” *Hypatia* 13, no. 1 (1998), 37. See also: Pamela Pansardi, “Power to and power over: two distinct concepts of power?,” *Journal of Political Power* 5, no. 1 (2012).

96. Jane Mansbridge, “Using Power/Fighting Power: The Polity,” in *Democracy and Difference*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 60; Julia Kraft, “Power-with, not power-over,” *Peace News* (2000); Bruce K. Berger, “Power Over, Power With, and Power to Relations: Critical Reflections on Public Relations, the Dominant Coalition, and Activism,” *Journal of Public Relations Research* 17, no. 1 (2005).

97. Lest we reify the locution let me note that various languages use different prepositions to express the same meaning. For example, Italian would have “*potere di*”, where “*di*” corresponds more closely to “of” than to “to”. The label of “power of” has occasionally been used in English as well: Colin Hay, “Divided by a Common Language: Political Theory and the Concept of Power,” *Politics* 17, no. 1 (1997), 50.

This is not to deny the importance of studying forms of “power-over”, nor to deny the moral value of the collective emancipation of “power-with”, etc. Such questions are not prejudged by the conceptual definition here sought, although they could easily be derailed by an unclear or incoherent one.

The second point that should be noted is that the operational quality of these definitions, all being empirical at their core, would prevent an understanding of the concept even without the equivalence between “can/being able” and “having the power to”. In fact, even if the definitions were not circular, they would still not be defining “power”, but rather the conditions according to which we could say that someone had power (or that, somehow, “there is” a subject-less power). This would be consistent with Dahl’s original intent of reducing power to a measurable quantity,<sup>98</sup> and it explains something about the ensuing debates; but an operationalization is not the same as, and cannot be substituted for, a conceptual definition, as Dahl himself noted. Indeed, if the point is to get empirical results, then the conditions to detect something *must not* be equivalent to a full definition – otherwise, the enquiry would not yield any new knowledge, it would be data-gathering, not inductive science.

Political scientists can diagnose things like civil wars, governmental legitimacy, international systems’ stability, *etc.*, on the basis of certain conditions that do not exhaust the definition of the phenomena. The more parsimonious the required empirical conditions, the stronger the theory. As a consequence, even if it were true that power be better conceived of as an empirically observ-

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98. Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” 202-09.



able “thing”,<sup>99</sup> and even if the common definitions were not as circular as they are, a proper understanding of what the “thing” is – as distinct from a set of conditions from which its presence could be determined – would still be missing.

The seemingly inescapable circularity could itself be a result of this conundrum, since a comprehensive operational definition could be obtained from a list of conditions only if the list encompassed all the possible instances of the concept.<sup>100</sup> Of course, such a list would be unmanageably long, but the need for it is obviated by the covert use of the same concept as part of the definition. It is in fact obvious that if we ascertain that someone has some specific form of power (one *can* do such and such), then it logically follows that they have at least some measure of power, even if the latter is not defined. Thus, “can/being able”, meaning “having the power to”, implicitly stands for all the instances of power, linguistically hiding the circularity and producing the illusion of a definition achieving the impossible feat of being at once conceptually exhaustive and operationally employable.

When the instance of power observed to detect power is very general, the definition may come close to cover the whole meaning, thus all instances, of the concept. As we noted, when this happens the circularity becomes more evident, as the definition tends to collapse into “power is power”. This is more or less what happens with Peter Morriss,<sup>101</sup> whose *Philosophical Analysis* is likely

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99. *Ibid.*, 201.

100. This would buckle the Socratic definition of what a concept is – *i.e.* not merely a list of examples – but if the list could really be all-encompassing, it would work in the same way for the empirical interests harbored by most social scientists.

101. Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*. The first edition, which is reproduced with little change besides an ex-

the only, and certainly the most important to date, book-length conceptual (as opposed to empirical/operational) enquiry into “power”.

Morriss individuates power as a “dispositional concept”,<sup>102</sup> most generally described as a “capacity to effect”,<sup>103</sup> which can be interpreted as a generic ability or, more relevantly for social and political power, as an “ableness” – which in Morriss’ lexicon would be an ability plus its employability in a concrete temporal context (*i.e.* the poor have the “ability” to eat caviar, as they possess functioning masticatory apparatuses, but they lack the “ableness” to do so, because they cannot actually obtain caviar).<sup>104</sup> Saying that power is a dispositional concept is equivalent to noting its potential character, as we saw with Lukes. We will later observe how potentiality – in its philosophical meaning – is related to, and differs from, power, but a first relevant result achieved by Morriss comes directly from the dispositional character of power, as he most clearly stated:

So power, as a dispositional concept, is neither a *thing* (a resource or vehicle) nor an *event* (an exercise of power): it is a *capacity*. And dispositional concepts are perfectly respectable ones that we do not need to replace by concepts of some other sort.<sup>105</sup>

This recognition is of paramount importance, since most accounts of power assumed it had the logical form of an object or a thing. This reification was explicit in Dahl, but actually more developed in Lukes’ original account, as he then removed the reference to the actor’s possibility of exer-

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tensive new introduction, was published in 1987.

102. *Ibid.*, §§ 3-4.

103. *Ibid.*, 30, 36-38, 41.

104. *Ibid.*, § 11.

105. *Ibid.*, 19.

cising power or refrain from doing so, and deepened even further in the “ultra-radical” Foucauldian accounts. This latter allegation may seem uncharitable, given how much Foucault stressed the contingencies of history, chiefly against the tendency to produce idealized generalizations typical of the Hegelian and Marxist traditions.<sup>106</sup> But it should be clear that, here, when speaking of the objectification or reification of “power” we are primarily referring to the logical and grammatical use of the concept, not to the philosophical critique against the undue hypostatization of contingent events.

Morris was not the first to discover that power is not to be conceptualized as a thing, but rather in dispositional terms. The point had been highlighted by Terence Ball, himself reprising Dorothy Emmet’s “admonition”,<sup>107</sup> and the earlier *dictum* by Alexander Hamilton: “What is a power, but the ability or faculty of doing a thing?”.<sup>108</sup> Morriss, however, has developed the idea thoroughly, especially by clarifying its relation with the conceptual priority of “power-to”, and the fact that dispositional concepts cannot be captured by operational definitions.<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, even he does not completely detach “power” from an objectified conceptualization. In fact, logically and gram-

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106. E.g.: Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), ch. 7; Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), Introduction.

107. Ball, “Power, Causation & Explanation,” 212-13; Dorothy Emmet, “The Concept of Power,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 54 (1954), 19-20. Truly, Ball forced Emmet’s hand somewhat; for she was merely saying that the meaning of power as a capacity should not be obscured by the reified meaning of power as a thing, while according to Ball (correctly, in my opinion) the conceptualization of power as a thing is to be avoided *tout court*.

108. Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *Federalist Papers* (1787), no. 33.

109. Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, 16-18.

matically, capacities and dispositions are still objects, and Morriss himself occasionally refers to power as a phenomenon,<sup>110</sup> despite having said that it is neither a thing nor an event.

The underlying problem is that even if dispositions or capacities are observable only when actualized, they are still conceived of as objective properties, which someone or something has or has not, may acquire or lose, and that have some specific content-meaning. At a first glance, this might seem just like the case of “power”. After all, saying that some do have power, while others do not, is a widespread use of the term – it is, in fact, its most common reification, which is perfectly acceptable as long as we remain aware of its metaphorical character. But the homology ends here: while we can say what it means to have the capacity of playing music (actually, by referring back to power/can/being able to), the same does not hold true for “power”, where we remain trapped in tautological circularities.

Indeed, it is not even correct to say, with Searle, that “power [...] names a capacity or an ability”;<sup>111</sup> and most importantly, it is not equivalent to saying that “the notion of power is the notion of a capacity”.<sup>112</sup> The second proposition may be true, but the first one is false, because plainly there is no capacity or ability named “power”, but rather power is more or less synonymous with “capacity” (though we will observe some different nuances later). Searle is, in fact, prisoner of the same circularity in defining “power” as the ability, that is to say the power, to get certain results:

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110. *Ibid.*, 91.

111. John R. Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 146.

112. *Ibid.*, 145.

“Power does not, in short, necessarily involve getting people to act against their desires and inclinations, but rather is the ability to get them to do so.”<sup>113</sup>

The recognition of power as a dispositional concept lays bare the circularity shared by most definitions. We could swap “power” with “capacity”, then with “ability”, or even “ableness”, and so on, but we would remain within the circle: someone is powerful/has the capacity/ability, if and only if... someone is powerful/has the capacity/ability. Since we cannot understand “capacity” without the concept of power, saying that “power” means “capacity” does not give us much of anything. Ultimately, by saying that power is a capacity, we are merely saying that power is *a* power.

Thus, we may see that the circularity problem does not pertain only to specified conceptualizations of power – from “power-over” interpreted as domination, up to extensive analyses of the preconditions and effects of power in a given society – but it is already embedded in the most abstract and general definitions attempted so far. Just as we could say what a particular power is, we may say what a specific capacity is; but we are equally unable to give a non circular definition of “power” and “capacity” or “ability” as general concepts.

We may understand this line of analysis as having correctly brought the question of the definition of power back to the conceptual level, but without solving it in a satisfying manner. In terms of the definition as articulated at the beginning of the section, this means that the focus shifts from points 2 and 3 – which dominated previous debates, making them empirical and not conceptual – to point 1, but the circularity itself is not evaded, or even acknowledged. Morriss, the

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113. *Ibid.*, 147.

most conspicuous representative of the analytic approach to “power”, has the merit of having most clearly explained the priority of “power to”, which is the same as to say the dispositional character of power. However, this and other important points about the uses of “power”, even before getting to its applicability to empirical enquiries,<sup>114</sup> presuppose the meaning of the concept itself, which has yet to be made explicit.

#### 1.4. Two objections: on circularity and conceptual pluralism

Before moving on to propose a properly conceptual definition of power there are at least two questions that should be addressed, lest the entire enterprise were dismissed as either futile or impossible. The inadequacy of extant definitions is systematically important to justify the effort to propose a new one, and such inadequacy is mostly due to their being circular. But is circularity really a defect for a conceptual definition? This is the first question we are going to address in this section. The second one is whether it does make sense to look for a single concept of power; given the decades-long quest to find one, it has been explicitly argued that it may well not.<sup>115</sup> But before getting to that, let us examine the circularity objection more closely.

There is, indeed, a sense in which every definition, expressing an equivalence, may be considered circular, so that:  $2+2 = 4 = 2+2 \dots$  and so on. Likewise, if we take “man” to be defined as the *animal rationale*, then of course an *animal rationale* is a man just as much as a man is an *animal rationale*. However, this analytic circularity – which would correspond, in fact, to the kind of defi-

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114. Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, parts 3 and 4.

115. Mark Haugaard, “Power: A ‘family resemblance’ concept,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 13, no. 4 (2010).

inition here sought – is not the same as observed in the extant definitions of power, which did not expound the semantic components of a concept, but rather inferred the presence of power from specific instantiations of it.

Thus, the generic definition “power is the power to do such and such” is circular, but not in the same way as  $2+2 = 4$ , but rather more like  $p \in P \rightarrow \exists P$ . That is to say: from an instance of power ( $p$ ) we infer the presence of power in general ( $P$ ).<sup>116</sup> This implication describes the operational logic of an empirical theory, on the condition that  $P$  were well defined, which is another way of observing how a definition of power is presupposed, but not given in the extant debates.

Another way to evade the circularity issue could be to assert that, even without a precise definition, we still have an idea of what “power” means, good enough to use without further analytic efforts, just as we often do with other basic concepts such as “causation”, “implication”, “being”, *etc.* After all, every definition is spelled out within time and space, and as such has to be finite, ending with some term which is assumed but not further explained. Thus, why should we not take power for such a primitive concept and then focus on where the real disagreements are, *viz.* the identification of the empirical instances of power which have been central to the debates? If that were acceptable, the critique here presented would be limited to the incorrect labeling of the discussions as “conceptual”, which could be deemed an insignificant semantic error.

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116. As observed before, when  $p$  is equal to the whole of  $P$ , we simply get to the tautology:  $P \rightarrow P$ .

There are arguments that can be read along these lines. For example, Searle dispatches the general concept of power as “a capacity”, not necessarily linked to human relationships,<sup>117</sup> and promptly moves on to the more specific “deontic powers” that are central to his social ontology. Similarly, as we saw with Lukes, one could accept that the most general concept of power is “power to” – which is the same as stating its equivalence with “can/being able to” – and then move on to discuss the politically and morally contentious instances of the power of someone over someone else. There is nothing wrong with this argument in the abstract, and the definition we shall propose will have to end with some undefined term (here the category, or modality, of possibility, as opposed to necessity) just like any other, but it cannot be accepted for the concrete case of “power”.

First of all, if one is interested in understanding a concept, then taking it as an undefinable primitive is acceptable only if no other option available. Otherwise, it would always be preferable to go further into the analysis, and my contention is precisely that it is possible to proceed, by examining the categorial meaning of power and articulating its correspondence with the modality of possibility.

Secondly, it is simply not true that, beyond the circularity, everyone has been working with the same intuitive notion of “power”. To the contrary, while the debates have been mostly dominated by empirical preoccupations, the effects of different underlying ideas of power have been evident. As we saw, “power” has often been conceived as an object or a phenomenon, while only a few the-

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117. Like the power of an engine: Searle, *Making the Social World*, 145.



orists have noted how incongruous such a linguistic use was. For some, “power” is inherently connected to a moral framework, while others conceive it independently from normative considerations.<sup>118</sup> Another important point of contention, which we have not yet examined, is whether “power” could be thought of as a form of causation, or rather be better conceived of in different terms.<sup>119</sup>

This lack of accord shows that the logical circularity is a genuine issue, to be solved through a proper definition, if we want to understand what we mean by “power”. But do we? Perhaps the variety of different meanings we just mentioned should lead us to conclude that there is no definition to be had. Rather, “power” could be a “family resemblance concept”, as argued by Mark Haugaard.<sup>120</sup> Taking a hint from Lukes’ and Connolly’s contention that power is an “essentially contested concept”,<sup>121</sup> Haugaard goes a step further by arguing that there is no single concept to be contested, but rather a plurality of different meanings employed within different language games. This, according to Haugaard, does not imply an “anything goes” relativism, because each use would be justified by its utility as a “conceptual tool”, or criticized for the lack thereof. In the end,

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118. Pamela Pansardi, “A non-normative theory of power and domination,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* (2012).

119. *Infra*, § 3.1.

120. Haugaard, “Power: A ‘family resemblance’ concept.”

121. William E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse* (Princeton Nj: Princeton University Press, 1974); Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*. It should be noted that power was not amongst the examples when the essential contestability thesis was first introduced: Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts.” “Essential contestedness”, in fact, depends on the normativity inscribed into some concepts, and the reason why Lukes had “power” as an essentially contested concept is because he originally understood it as synonymous with the normatively condemnable term of “domination”: Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 12, 74, 85 ff. This has little to do with the conceptual pluralism advocated by Haugaard.

in his “modest way”, Haugaard hopes to “have put an end to the quest for the holy grail of the essence of power, while simultaneously showing that the alternative is not nihilistic relativism”.<sup>122</sup>

More explicitly than most, Haugaard connects the incapacity to provide a definition of a concept with the underlying idea that concepts are “tools”.<sup>123</sup> Truly, if concepts are to be defined in order to achieve some goal, practical or theoretical, then it is obvious that, goals being many and varied, conceptual meanings will likewise be. Haugaard does not take this as a problem, but rather as a normal feature of our scientific/theoretical use of concepts; thus, his might seem an important argument against the enquiry here attempted. Upon closer examination, however, that is not the case, and we shall see how part of his critique actually provides more reasons – nay, the same reasons reached through a different route – to seek a precise conceptual definition.

First, we have to distinguish between two levels within Haugaard’s argument. On its own terms, it derives the observation of a plurality of “concepts” of power chiefly from the debates that we have already seen not to be conceptual, but rather empirical/operational. This is understandable, as such have been the vast majority of discourses about power, but it still muddles the allegedly conceptual argument. Just like these debates, in fact, Haugaard’s proposal is meant to make sense on an operational, not conceptual, ground:

What has led me to these conclusions concerning ‘family resemblances’ and ‘language games’ is, above all, the considered view that the majority of the well-known works on power in the social sciences, many of which are perceived to be mutually excluding positions, each in their own

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122. Haugaard, “Power: A ‘family resemblance’ concept,” 436.

123. *Ibid.*, 419, 427, 429-30, 436.

way describe a legitimate facet of *the workings of power* in everyday life.<sup>124</sup>

We are thus, again, discussing how power works, not really its definition. Here there is not much that is new, since Dahl had already noted how different operational definitions would have been adequate to different empirical contexts.<sup>125</sup> While not new, the suggestion that different operationalizations may be useful within different contexts does not seem to be wrong either. We could thus take Haugaard's as another amongst many confusions between the empirical/operational and the conceptual – which may be still useful for what it actually is, once the appropriate level of analysis has been clarified – and leave it at that.

Nevertheless, parts of Haugaard's argument would apply to a properly conceptual examination of power, and thus merit a more thorough examination. In principle, there is nothing stopping Wittgenstein's notions of "language-game" and "family resemblances" from being applied to "power". It is possible that we use the word in different senses across language-games, and it is also possible that no precise definition could be spelled out because the various uses happen to be bound together only by disjunct similarities, not by any single common quality. Examples from extant debates could thus be useful to discern whether the concept of power is really better understood in such Wittgensteinian terms, if only the focus were placed on the uses of the word, rather than on the purported empirical descriptions. However, while the two Wittgensteinian ideas could apply to "power", it is doubtful that both could at once.

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124. *Ibid.*, 420, *emphasis added*.

125. Dahl, "The Concept of Power," 214.

A language-game represents a context within which meanings are attributed, and it can take almost any shape or form, from actual games with their explicit rules, to social situations where expectations are informally enforced to constrain what makes sense and what does not, up to the more general level of natural languages, with their always fuzzy grammars and semantics.<sup>126</sup> Words have meaning within a language-game, and by definition they cannot have the exact same meaning across different languages, even if translations may be possible if we accept a degree of imprecision. One may contest that the whole notion of language-game makes sense,<sup>127</sup> or that it is in any way useful, but that is what it is.

A family resemblance, on the other hand, is the kind of similarity observed in relatives, rendering them recognizable as members of a family even if there is no single trait they all share.<sup>128</sup> A “family resemblance concept”, thus, would be a concept whose instances exhibit this kind of similarity, rather than being encompassed by a neat definition of what is common to all of them and them only – such as the classical “man is a rational animal.” What is relevant for us is that the idea of family resemblances applies to the definition of one concept – within the same language-game, as otherwise *ex hypothesis* there would be no single concept to be explained – not to the definition of multiple concepts across different language-games, as Haugaard had it.

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126. The word “game” translates the German *Spiel*, which in this case might actually have been better rendered with “play”, since Wittgenstein intent in using it was to emphasize the performative aspect of languages: Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 23. In fact, it is well arguable that a “game”, understood in its more restricted meaning as opposed to the freer “play”, is not at all suitable for language: Joseph Heath, “Is Language a Game,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 1 (1996).

127. E.g. Max Black, “Wittgenstein’s Language-games,” *Dialectica* 33, no. 3/4 (1979).

128. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§ 66-69.

The image of family resemblances is meant to illustrate the fuzziness inherent to some concepts, which remain nevertheless unitary. Wittgenstein did not say that there is no single concept of “game”, quite to the contrary he was arguing against the idea that precise and explicit definitions were the *only* way to individuate a concept as such. In fact, there is little ambiguity in recognizing the unitary meaning of “game”. When the word is employed in different contexts – as when “game” is used to refer to hunted animals, or to a sub-set of a tennis match – no competent speaker fails to recognize the different meanings assumed by the same word,<sup>129</sup> whereas the “main” meaning is easily recognized as one. Even if we cannot provide a bounded definition, when we speak of a game of Monopoly, a video game, a football game, and so on, we understand that they are all games, and that they are so in a sense which is different from the game we can bring home from hunting (though the two meanings may be related, since hunting used to be considered a very entertaining game).

Family resemblances are exactly what, in lieu of a more formal definition, individuate a concept as one. The Wittgenstenian notion, thus, does not point to the pluralism sought by Haugaard, but rather to the possibility that the one concept of power could be fuzzy, obtained by connecting different uses, which have similarities but no trait common to them all.

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129. And nobody argues that an overarching “game” is made up by the union of these different concepts all referred to by the same word. Truly, even these “games” share some resemblances, which is likely the historical reason why they are called by the same name, but evidently not all resemblances are relevant to make various uses instances of the same concept, and this may be another example of the lack of formal precision of ordinary language emphasized by Wittgenstein.

Here two things are to be observed. First, the fact that some ordinary language concepts could only be defined by means of family resemblances does not imply that all have to be: the possibility of providing a more precise definition is not foreclosed until shown to be unachievable.<sup>130</sup> Second, the concepts made up by family resemblances should still be intuitively clear and easy to individuate, otherwise they would not be parts of a functioning language. This obtains for “game”, but it does not for “power”, where we have observed many disagreements, confusions, and logical circularities. Thus, in this respect, our enquiry is not futile.

The language-games objection, if it were well grounded, would rather point toward a plurality of concepts. The word “power” is in fact used with different meanings, some even contradictory to each other. But then, what stops us from observing that the participants to the debate are talking about different concepts, and should just be aware of that in order to avoid talking past each other?<sup>131</sup> We are trying to get to a viable definition of what we mean by “power” not to disqualify what others have said about the matters that most matter to them, as Haugaard seems to

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130. Compare “game” with “number”: *Ibid.*, § 68.

131. Haugaard characterizes this as “a kind of beside-the-point rejection of their ideas”, which in his view should be avoided: Haugaard, “Power: A ‘family resemblance’ concept,” 430. However, such an objection is not a rejection of one’s argument, but at most a correction to advance clarity. If we say that the “power” talked about by Foucault was not really power (according to its ordinary language meaning), we are certainly not saying that what Foucault wrote is thereby moot, just that the topic is not power properly so called. In any case, Haugaard gives no reason why the “beside-the-point rejection” should be condemned; some arguments are indeed beside the point, and it is no sin to point that out.

assume,<sup>132</sup> but rather to achieve a clarity which would presumably be beneficial to all linguistic uses.

In any case, taking the uses of the term as referring to different concepts in different language-games would seem to lead to a plurality of many concepts which just happen to be referred to by the same word (just like “bear” has the different meanings of “carry”, “support”, “endure”, “give birth”, as well as being the name of a large plantigrade), rather than to “a cluster of concepts, each of which qualifies as ‘power’”.<sup>133</sup>

By evoking the idea of family resemblances, Haugaard wants to say that all these concepts across different language-games still have something tying them together. Family resemblances, as Wittgenstein understood them, cannot be this something, but we can get a better idea of what Haugaard meant by observing more closely one crucial step of his argument. A well known issue with language-games is that they can have any shape or form, thus a word or sign could assume any meaning, and when things get complex enough it may become impossible to compare or translate across different games. Unbounded relativism, both descriptive and normative, may lurk under the benevolent surface of pluralism. Haugaard, though, is adamant that not “anything goes”.<sup>134</sup> The criterion to determine what goes, harmonically to the alleged “toolness” of concepts,

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132. This assumption is part and parcel of the confusion between the empirical and the conceptual level. Truly, if we were describing social and political phenomena, saying that my description is correct could well imply that yours is wrong. Meanings, though, do not work in the same way, since pointing out that you may have misused a word does not mean that what you were doing with it, therein including a description of the empirical world, is *ipso facto* incorrect (though it could be, if it involved logical contradictions).

133. *Ibid.*, 420.

134. *Ibid.*, 420, 426.

is thus explained: “In language games, the better definition is the one that accomplishes the task the theorists set for themselves.”<sup>135</sup>

However, if what “goes” is determined by its conformity to an end, and since we can both construct and employ a language with any goal in mind, then how is it possible to say that anything does not go? One could say “power is a yellow rubber duck”, and that could conceivably serve some weird end.<sup>136</sup> Here ordinary language, as the overarching game that makes the other specialized languages intelligible and to some extent mutually traducible, has to come back into play.

Haugaard, true to his instrumentalism, says that stranding too far away from ordinary language is counterproductive, as it would make the discourse unintelligible; but this is hardly a good answer. On the one hand, an otherwise intelligible language-game where just one word, like “power”, were redefined *ad hoc* would remain equally intelligible, provided that the redefinition were either explicitly explained or clarified by contextual means. On the other hand, many language-games, including those regarded by Hauagaard as important theories of power, are already specialized enough to be utterly incomprehensible to the non-initiated, and few believe this to be enough to disqualify them. Thus, while being broadly understandable can surely be useful, it does

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135. *Ibid.*, 426. Incidentally, this is a very non-Wittgensteinian, and borderline solipsistic, explanation of how language-games would function.

136. This is silly, for sure, and would probably correspond to a silly theory; but remember how we have observed theorists using “power” to mean just the absence, or severe limitation, of power, and many others ultimately defining the concept as “power is power”. Likewise, the categorial mistake of taking power for an object is logically of the same kind of taking it for a rubber duck.



not make for a viable criterion, as it fails both to exclude absurdities and to allow for serious theories.

The underlying problem is that usefulness works as a criterion only *within* language-games. The governing role of ordinary language in rendering the various games mutually intelligible and translatable has to be framed in terms of meaning, not usefulness. The reason why theories about power, as related to human affairs,<sup>137</sup> have to maintain some connection with the ordinary meaning of the term is not that they would otherwise be incomprehensible or useless, but rather that they would not be about power in the first place, since the source to define what “power” means has to be the use of the concept in ordinary language. We may note incongruities or contradictions in our language, and thus privilege some uses over others or even propose corrections,<sup>138</sup> but if we decided on principle to employ “power” in a specialized meaning, according to the goal we set for ourselves as theorists, then we would no longer be discussing power but something else, or possibly nothing at all.

Consistency with ordinary language cannot be absolute, at least for an expansive meaning of “ordinary”. Nevertheless, it is simply not true that there is a multiplicity of conflicting meanings floating around in the English language (or in any other). To the contrary, the failed attempts to provide a formalized definition of power are largely responsible for amplifying a confusion which

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137. Outside of which, for example in natural science, it may not be problematic to use “power” in an entirely specialized meaning, such as it is for “power” as a physical quantity equivalent to work/time. Even these uses may have some connection with ordinary language, as we shall observe later (§2.2), but in such cases, that is not necessary, and nothing relevant would change if we referred to the physical quantity of “power” by any other word or symbol.

138. Again, as aptly observed by Austin, “ordinary language is *not* the last word”, but “it *is* the *first* word”: Austin, “A Plea for Excuses: The Presidential Address,” 11; Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, 3.

is less pronounced, if at all present, in natural languages. Of course ordinary usage is for the most part un-reflexive, but this does not imply that an explicit definition is in principle unachievable. Clearly, some uses would be ruled out, otherwise the definition would not be particularly relevant, but the claim is that such uses would be inconsistent not with an external definition, but with the core of the concept as already present to us, if often only implicitly.

Ordinary language, indeed, forces itself onto Haugaard, as we can observe in his brief topology of different powers:

*Episodic power* refers to the exercise of power that is linked to agency. *Dispositional power* signifies the inherent capacities of an agent that the agent may have, irrespective of whether or not they exercise this capacity. *Systemic power* refers to the ways in which given social systems confer differentials of dispositional power on agents, thus structuring possibilities for action.<sup>139</sup>

The triadic division may be perspicuous, but ostensibly it does not spell out three concepts across different language games, rather outlining three specifications of a general concept, as evidenced by the addition of the adjectives, “episodic”, “dispositional” and “systemic” to the noun “power”. The fact that we may talk about various kinds of power, each with its own qualifications, seems to suggest the presence of one underlying concept rather than its absence; just as speaking of normative and descriptive propositions does not mean that there is no single concept of “proposition”, but rather presupposes one.

We may also note that Haugaard employs the word “power” to refer not just to power, but also to the exercise and distribution thereof (“*Episodic power* refers to the exercise of power”, *etc.*). This

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139. Haugaard, “Power: A ‘family resemblance’ concept,” 425.

might be done, if one so wishes, but it does not change the fact that the concept of the exercise or distribution of  $x$  is, by definition, different from  $x$  itself, even if both may be referred to by the same word. In the end, the “cluster of concepts” observed by Haugaard is a set which includes a general, yet undefined, “power” and then many derivative, more specific, concepts referring to its exercise, distribution, *etc.*

Far from rendering our enquiry moot, this situation only highlights the relevance of understanding the meaning of this “power” which is exercised, discussed, contested, but somehow never defined.



## 2. The meaning of power

As observed in the previous chapter, even the most skillful analyses failed to provide a viable definition of power, generally remaining embroiled in circularities, where “power” was defined through terms immediately reducible to its own meaning, such as “can/being able to”, “capacity”, “ability”, *etc.* The stubbornness of this obstacle is not purely contingent. While it may be reinforced by quirks peculiar to the English language, the difficulty in evading the circularity points to the genuinely basic quality of our concept. “Power”, indeed, is quite simple, albeit not so primitive as not to be further analyzable.

In order to perform such analysis, however, it is necessary to individuate precisely what type of concept “power” is – the place it occupies within the arrangement of our languages, or its “syntax”, if you will.<sup>1</sup> We have observed how incorrect assumptions in this regard (chiefly the implicit idea that “power” refers to some thing or object) contributed to derail previous enquiries, even before we could get to the point of taking issue with the concept’s semantic content. Thus, before

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1. Searle, *Making the Social World*, 146.

getting into the substantive meaning of power – basically the application of the modality, or category, of possibility from the perspective of an actor situated in a world, though we will gain a better understanding of this only after having clarified the proper stance to analyze “power” – it is advisable to spend some words on the form of the concept.

This will lead us to better comprehend how “power” does not denote any object or thing, concrete or abstract as they might be, but rather a condition or a status: the condition of having possibilities available and representing them as such. This understanding will open up a domain of enquiry quite different from those purveyed by previous definitional attempts. The idea of a condition is logically more complex than that of an object or thing, in that it presupposes one or more conditioned, someone or something that is in, or is affected by, the condition in question.

Now the easiest, or at least most common, way to grasp the conditioned implied by the understanding of power as a modality would be to say that we, humans, are the subjects that can find themselves in such condition to objectively have possibilities and subjectively perceiving them as such. We shall see, though, how this formulation cannot be considered entirely valid, for it is both unable to descriptively capture the nuances of “power” and metaphysically too onerous for the modest purpose of defining a concept as used in ordinary language. The consideration of what kind of concept “power” is, thus, will bring us to examine Hannah Arendt’s phenomenological stance as the most appropriate to capture the meaning of power as denoting a categorial/modal condition. In turn, this will lead to recast the preliminary definition of our concept in the

Arendtean terms of “world” and “person”, eschewing the reliance on the philosophically problematic categories of objectivity and subjectivity.

Once the form of the concept and its implication will have been spelled out, we shall be in a better position to examine its semantic content more closely. In section 2.2 we will substantiate the claimed correspondence of power to the category of possibility by analyzing common linguistic uses, through different languages, as well as examples taken from contemporary and historical thinkers. This will show how the most general meaning of power is the expression of the modality of possibility as represented to and by worldly actors.

In the course of rendering explicit the meaning of our concept, we will achieve three further results. First, we will see how seemingly divergent uses of “power”, from power as domination, to the causal-like concept often employed by political scientists, can be explained as special cases under the definition here proposed – which will thus be ostensibly shown to cover the general concept we are looking for. Secondly, we will introduce the distinction between power and potentiality (*potentia*), which will be crucial for the rest of this work. Finally, the contrast between the open possibilities entailed by the concept power and the determined results implied by both potentiality and causal necessity will better demonstrate how the definition of an actor or agent, a person with their own visible character, is co-essential to the meaning of power.

## 2.1. The syntax of power

... power, far from being the means to an end, is actually the very condition enabling a group of people to think and act in terms of the means-end category.<sup>2</sup>

The better part of the definitional debates, as we saw, has been misled by the assumption that power is a “thing”, or a “phenomenon”. Here we are interested in understanding the logical form of our concept; it is thus largely indifferent which things or phenomena have at times been called “power”, for so long as power were conceived as an object it would be impossible to properly understand its meaning. We noted some relevant reactions against the widespread objectification of power, in the works of Terence Ball and, more at length, in Peter Morriss’ *Philosophical Analysis*.<sup>3</sup>

Even Morris, however, did not go far enough in clarifying the type of our concept. While he correctly pointed out how power is a “dispositional concept”, he did not dwell on the fact that, nevertheless, power cannot be identified with any given disposition. Just as there is no phenomenon, thing, or set thereof, corresponding to the name of “power”,<sup>4</sup> so there is no capacity or disposition which is called “power”. Grammatically, dispositions and capacities are objects, just as things and phenomena are, thus equating power with a capacity still represents a sort of objectification. Of course, having power means having capacities and dispositions, just not because power

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2. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harvest Books, 1970), 51.

3. *Supra*, p. 34.

4. The most common sentence, spoken or written, about power in the last century is likely to be “power is a social phenomenon” (104,000 results for the exact phrase on Google at the moment I am writing this); unfortunately, it has no discernible meaning.



is either, but rather because it denotes the condition of possibility underlying the meaning of both.

This homology can be recognized by observing how saying that some thing or person has a capacity or a disposition means that something can be done, either by them or to them, which corresponds to the meaning of power. In English, both “disposition” and “capacity” covers both meanings, although “disposition” may have a more passive nuance, as well as, perhaps, a closer affinity with the idea of an oriented potentiality (as opposed to a possibility whose realization is not specified in advance, as we will better see in the next section). “Ability” may also be used to denote both an active and a passive meaning, but it seems to incline toward the active more than “capacity” does.<sup>5</sup> “Power” appears to be the most actively inclined amongst these quasi-synonymous terms, even though it still indicates a dispositional state which may or may not be actualized.

What all these concepts have in common is that they denote not things or phenomena, but rather states or conditions things or people may be into, and ways or modalities in which they may be represented to/by an actor. This is part of the sense in which power is a condition of thinking and acting in certain ways, as in Arendt’s quote opening this section. Of course, expressions like “having *a* capacity/ability/power” (as opposed to “having power/being powerful”) point toward specific sets of possibilities, which lend themselves well to reified conceptualizations. This, however, should not hinder us from noticing how even specific abilities, which grammatically are

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5. We may say that a man has the capacity or the ability to do X, but it would be awkward, if perhaps still comprehensible, to swap “ability” for “capacity” when talking about how capacious a container is.

objects, such as playing music or obtaining obedience, do not denote things, but rather the possibility of doing or achieving said things. If we remove the specifications to obtain a more general concept, what remains is not some object called “capacity” or “ability” as such, but rather the idea of being capable or able: not a thing, but a state, a condition, a modality.

“Power” behaves in much the same way – it is in fact the same, since the state of being capable,<sup>6</sup> properly unpacked, can well be called power – as we can objectify specific powers, such as “executive power” or “the power of persuasion”, but if we remove the specifications what we are left with is not an object but a status, the condition of being powerful: being in such a state as to have possibilities available.

Often, it is the same thing to speak of “possibility”, “capacity”, or “probability”:<sup>7</sup> in some cases there is a nearly perfect overlap, as evidenced by the use of the modal verbs “can/may” to mean them all. Yet, the concept of possibility carries some nuances that set it apart, and that are relevant to understand power. Roughly, “possibility” shares the objective aspect that “probability” possesses, but “capacity” lacks – situations, facts, and outcomes, may all be possible just as they may be probable, but they cannot “be capable” – and at the same time it covers the subjective meaning

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6. Here meant as in expressions like “being a capable person”. In other cases, “capable/capacity” unlike power, seems to invite the specifying question “capable of what?”, which makes it closer to the idea of a potentiality, defined by a specific end into which it is actualized, as we will better see in the next section.

7. Here we are referring to the ordinary meaning of “probability”, its more rigorous mathematical/scientific meaning is more strongly opposed to “possibility”, as we shall examine in § 3.2.

that “capacity” has, but “probability” lacks: an actor may have the capacity and the possibility of acting in a certain way, but they cannot “have the probability” of doing something.<sup>8</sup>

Power corresponds to the category, or modality, of possibility, as we will better understand once we get to examine its semantics. However, “power” is not the same as “possibility” – if it were, we would just be offering another circular definition. To capture the proper meaning of “power” we have to take into account its double character, so to speak. Thus, I am powerful if I can perform some actions *and* at the same time perceive this performance as a possibility for me, which I may or may not actualize, rather than a necessity. We may say that by ascribing power we mean a double application of the category of possibility in both the objective and subjective sense. Someone has power/is powerful if they are in the condition of objectively having possibilities available and they subjectively represent said possibilities as such (rather than as necessities).

“Objective” and “subjective,”<sup>9</sup> while useful to capture the meaning of power as a first approximation, do not hold under scrutiny. It seems clear that if we have an objective possibility to do or achieve something – say, persuading people to join us in a political demonstration – and we perceive such feat as a possibility, then we have a certain power, while we do not if we are either un-

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8. It may be probable for a person to do or achieve something, but that is just the point: probability is expressed objectively. There are exceptions, locutions like “she has the probability of...” or, conversely, like “this thing is capable of...”, are sometimes used. I take those to be linguistic quirks that do not affect the argument, although it is possible that they will cohere around a more “objectivist” idea of people’s actions and motivations. If that happened, however, it would represent a shift in the understanding of being a person, from which the element of having power to act would be further removed, not a change in the meaning of possibility. We will examine the difference between probability and possibility at length in the next chapter, see: *infra*, pp. 161 ff.

9. It should be noted that, even as a temporary place-holder, “objective” is here understood in its primary meaning as “referring to objects”, not in the more usual sense, related but misleadingly different, of “certain and independent from the observer”. Likewise “subjective” means “from the perspective of a subject”, but does not imply further assumptions about the uncertainty or the variability of the knowledge derived from such point of view.

able to persuade, or if the possibility of performing such persuasion subjectively appears fore-closed to us. Some people might have great rhetorical skills and oratory, so that they would be very successful at the task of political persuasion if they engaged in it, but be too shy (or too principled, too aloof... *etc.*), either in general or concerning specific matters, to make use of their gifts.<sup>10</sup> Thus, at a glance we may say that someone is powerful if they have possibilities in both the objective and the subjective sense, and otherwise not.

Looking more closely, though, the distinction between objective and subjective starts to unravel. Firstly, it is not clear on which side other people would fall, since they do not seem to be part of our subjectivity (unless we committed to solipsism, but then that would shatter the distinction all the same), and yet they are not purely reducible to objects, unless we were willing to eliminate from the domain of power anything that had to do with appealing to others as subjects, including rhetorical persuasion. That would sit weirdly with the meaning of power, the “power of persuasion” of the previous example being, if anything, prototypical.<sup>11</sup> Thus, even if it were conceivable to reduce everything outside of ourselves, including other people, to objectivity, this would simply

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10. This may partly overlap with Morriss’ distinction between “ableness” and ability (*supra*, p. 34), but that does not necessarily hold in every case, since both objective possibilities and our perceptions of them may be described in context-bound terms or not, thus count as either ability or ableness in Morriss’ jargon. This is obvious for objective possibilities (so that the poor people in Morriss’ example objectively have the capacity to eat caviar, and objectively are unable to procure it), but obtains in the same way for the subjective side of the equation, as there may be people who have a more inflated, or deflated, perception of their possibilities always and in general (even to the extremes of pathologies), as well as more context-bound variations, as we sometimes experience the feeling of having more open possibilities, and sometimes less, even while our objective capacities and assets remain the same.

11. As evidenced by the wealth of literature (ranging from academic to self-help manuals) with this very title, *e.g.*: Harry Hazel, *The Power of Persuasion* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005); Robert V. Levine, *The Power of Persuasion: How We’re Bought and Sold* (Hoboken NJ: Wiley, 2006); Kirsten Kozolanka, *The Power of Persuasion: The Politics of the New Right in Ontario* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2006); Winston Fletcher, *Powers of Persuasion: The Inside Story of British Advertising* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Louis Blom-Cooper, *Power of Persuasion: Essays by a Very Public Lawyer* (Oxford and Portland OR: Hart Publishing, 2015).

mean that our enquiry into language would find no correspondence in our metaphysics, but the subjective/objective dichotomy would remain an imprecise fit for such (now fictitious) concept of power. More ordinarily, we would think other people to have their own subjectivities, even though they, and their actions, appear to us as facts in the objective world. In our example, the “objective” possibility of persuading people depends in part on their “subjective” reactions to our efforts, straddling both sides of the first approximative definition.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, it is possible to doubt that self-representations are better described as subjective in each and every case. One could make any kind of argument – psychology, anthropology, sociology, neuroscience, Marxist critique of ideology... take your pick – to claim that our internal representations are objectively determined by one or another causal factor. Regardless of the causes, or lack thereof, simple introspection shows that sometimes we are aware that our appraisal of possibilities is subjective, but sometimes we are not. One may not feel like standing up and convincing people to walk out in protest, because they are shy, and thus they do not have the power to do so, even if at the same time they know to be excellent persuaders. On the other hand, it is possible to lack awareness, so that what might be described as possible for us from an external point of view, could not be so described by ourselves. The latter situation corresponds to more poignant political cases: there may be a sense in which it is possible for the oppressed to rise and win their revolution, but if it so happened that they had internalized the ideology of their oppressors,<sup>13</sup> to the

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12. We shall later see, in chapter 5, how this same straddling of the line between objective and subjective, so that persuasion never has the certainty of an objective process and yet it is not random either, is central to the intrinsic connection between language and power.

13. See for example the discussion of ideological domination in: Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, chs. 2-3.

point that they neither wanted to revolt nor were able to even conceive of a revolution,<sup>14</sup> would it still be fair to describe their lack of possibility as merely subjective? Even what is in our minds at any given moment appears to have an objectivity of its own.

Thirdly, we could question whether the external world is reducible to objectivity. As we mentioned, our power appears to depend greatly on the dispositions of other people, but we should broaden this consideration to include linguistic meaning in general. Even if not everything is linguistically constructed, something certainly is. Even assuming a realist position with regard to objects and phenomena,<sup>15</sup> our interpretations and representations of them are in some measure influential in determining our possibilities. Surely said representations are, at least partly, influenced by language as it is used publicly by other subjects. This being the case, a clear distinction between objectivity and subjectivity cannot be maintained, because the meanings objects and phenomena in the external world have for us are, at least partly, linguistically determined, and while language may appear to us as objectively existing, we also know that its semantics depends the agreement, implicit or explicit, amongst speaking subjects, including ourselves, in given times and places.

The problems in squaring the objective/subjective definition with the observation of how “power” is usually employed could perhaps be solved by adopting a specific ontology. But this is precisely the problem from the point of view of our inquiry: if taken seriously, the categories of objectivity and subjectivity would imply a commitment to a metaphysical standpoint, which is an

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14. The very concept of “revolution”, of course, came into use at certain times and places; it is thus easy to imagine contexts where it was not available, even independently from ideological domination: Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London, New York: Penguin, 1990), ch.1.

15. John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1997), chs. 1, 7-9.

improper stance for the modest purpose of clarifying the meaning of a concept, which is used both across different philosophical positions and, most often, quite independently from them: otherwise, it could not function as part of ordinary language, as “power” manifestly does. In view of this issue, what might seem a *detour* through Hannah Arendt’s phenomenology of worldliness is indeed necessary to expound the same definition in a way that, while apparently less familiar, is both more precise and metaphysically less demanding than the “colloquial” version hinging on the subjective/objective distinction.

We shall begin by more closely considering the modal, or categorial, quality of power. The connection with the category of possibility, which we will further explore in the next section, should by itself clarify that there is no such *thing* as power, because power is not something that *is* as an independent object, but rather a quality, a modality, which may be conceptually applied to actors and (to a lesser degree) objects. This observation points us toward two types of concept that “power” could be. If we operated under a classical understanding of being, then “power”, referring to a basic quality or modality of being as we perceive it, could be called a category, in the Kantian sense.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, if the “being” whose state we are talking about were those particular beings that we are, and if we presumed that such peculiarity made a difference for the

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16. Nowadays, few would yield to Kant’s contention that categories, in the exact number of twelve, are pure a priori concepts; nevertheless, we still use concepts that are devoid of content, that acquire a referent only through further specifications, and that are conditions of understanding, speaking, and, therefore, acting in certain modes. Power is one such concept, and the relevant modality is that of possibility.

kind of states or conditions attributable to this being, then the meaning of power would appear closer to that of an Heideggerian existential.<sup>17</sup>

Both meanings would individuate a modal concept, but neither would suffice to cover the ordinary meaning of our concept, which is rather made up, perhaps uneasily, by the conjunction of both. Fittingly, given her Kantian-Heideggerian academic education, such a conjunction of perspectives can be found, though often left implicit, throughout Hannah Arendt's work, both in general and in her specific treatment of power. Unpacking the resulting stance, from which theorists may confront concepts without immediately distorting them in order to pursue their own ulterior ends (practical or theoretical), is itself a necessary premise to properly understood what may be at stake in discussing the meaning of power.

Thus, by turning to Arendt, we will be able to accomplish three intertwined results. We shall first better clarify how and why a non-instrumental, non-teleological, stance is the aptest one to take when studying concepts such as "power". This will lead to briefly examine Arendt's phenomenological approach, and some of its contents, which presupposes theoretically and showcase performatively the aforementioned non-teleological stance. Finally, the concepts of "world" and "person", within Arendt's phenomenology, will allow us to refine our preliminary definition, eschewing the metaphysical baggage implied by the notions of objectivity/subjectivity we have introduced as temporary placeholders.

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17. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany NY: SUNY, 1996), 10-11.



### 2.1.1. Worldliness and personality

Throughout her *œuvre*, Arendt kept an unwavering focus on understanding concepts, appreciating their subtleties, and maintaining their distinctions. All her major works can be read as answering, in complex and original ways, simple conceptual questions: what is the meaning of authority, freedom, revolution, action work and labor, thinking willing and judging, totalitarianism, violence,<sup>18</sup> and, in our case, power?<sup>19</sup> *Per se* a primarily definitional interest would be typical of philosophers – from Socrates to Hobbes, up to contemporary analytic philosophy – and as such, from social sciences’ perspective, could be framed through the common juxtaposition between theoretical and empirical approaches.

This facile misunderstanding could be avoided by taking seriously Arendt’s protest of being not a philosopher,<sup>20</sup> but rather a political theorist.<sup>21</sup> Lacking an exact comprehension of what she meant by that, though, an explicit recognition of the point is often accompanied by a performative disregard of it, leading to critical discussions of Arendt’s work as if it were to create, or refine, concepts so as to make them useful for either political action, a scientific/historical understanding

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18. Hannah Arendt, “What is Authority?,” in *Between Past and Future* (London, New York: Penguin, 1993); Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?,” in *Between Past and Future* (London, New York: Penguin, 1993); Arendt, *On Revolution*; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego, New York: Harcourt, 1978); Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego, New York: Harcourt, 1979); Arendt, *On Violence*.

19. “Power” is explicitly at the forefront in *On Violence*, but the theme permeated her writings ever since *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

20. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Thinking, 3. See also: Robert Burch, “Recalling Arendt on Thinking,” in *Action and Appearance: Ethics and the Politics of Writing in Arendt*, ed. Anna Yeatman, *et al.* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

21. Hannah Arendt, “What Remains? The Language Remains: A Conversation with Gunter Gaus,” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (London, New York: Penguin, 2000), 3-4. Nowadays, the video of the interview with Gaus is easily available on the internet, and well worth watching.

of it, or both. Thus, the familiar scheme of concepts as “tools”, useful either for practical endeavors or for explanatory theories, has been applied to Arendt, even though the rejection of such model underpinned her entire work.

While Arendt has surely been influential, and anyone is free to put her ideas to whatever use they liked, her manifest intent was neither to be useful nor to influence others. Rather, she claimed to be interested in understanding for its own sake;<sup>22</sup> in this sense, at least, she was quite the philosopher in the classical sense.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, for all her praises of action, she ascribed her mature self to the un-political *bios theoreticos*.<sup>24</sup>

In what sense, then, was she not a philosopher? Besides the contempt for those intellectuals who so easily adjusted to Nazism, Arendt's rejection of the label has to do with what she saw as philosophy's habit of reducing politics to something else, slandering the world of appearances, and denying the human condition of plurality. These three philosophical vices cohere from Arendt's point of view, as they all result in demeaning action as always *for* a non-political end, usually located in some un-worldly or other-worldly space,<sup>25</sup> which would be one and the same

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22. *Ibid.*, 4-5; Jerome Kohn, “Introduction,” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2005).

23. Dolf Stemberger, “The Sunken City: Hannah Arendt's Idea of Politics,” *Social Research* 44, no. 1 (1977).

24. Hannah Arendt, “Prologue,” in *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005); Melvyn A. Hill, ed. *Hannah Arendt: The recovery of the public world* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 311 ff.

25. Here the difference between classical philosophy and modern social sciences is that the determination of the end is allegedly moved from the metaphysical to the social realm; but, from Arendt's perspective there is the same fault in subjecting politics to standards external to it.

for everyone – for, if the plurality of ends were recognized, it would then be implausible to claim any of them as a shared justification.

Arendt's political theorists are not active participants, at least not insofar as they are theorizing, but neither are they ivory-tower thinkers – projecting what is good and just for everybody from their own higher perspective – or external objective observers, as an ideal-typical social scientist (or a pre-critical metaphysician) could be. Rather, their point of view is that of persons who, while not immediately engaged in action, do not see themselves as different in kind from those that are, but rather as equally interested members of the political space. A space which may be broader than a single political community – as in Kant's spectatorship of the French Revolution, an obvious influence on Arendt's perception of her own stance<sup>26</sup> – but which is still open and egalitarian in the sense that each person's distinct position does not afford them any special claim to truth, besides what they are able to sustain through their words and deeds.<sup>27</sup>

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26. Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (New York: Abaris Books, 1979), 153-55; Bryan Garsten, "The Elusiveness of Arendtian Judgment," *Social Research* 74, no. 4 (2007), 1083-1084, 1093-1096. The Kantian concept of "enlarged mentality" or "enlarged thought" is the most relevant one to how Arendt understood the peculiar detached-but-involved position of the theorist, see: Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), esp. 39-46.

27. For Arendt, the living archetype of this "openness" was Karl Jaspers, see: Hannah Arendt, "What is Existential Philosophy," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2005), 183; Hannah Arendt, "Karl Jaspers: A Laudatio," in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970). For the philosophical relationship between Arendt and Jaspers see especially: Lewis P. Hinchman, and Sandra K. Hinchman, "Existentialism Politicized: Arendt's Debt to Jaspers," *The Review of Politics* 53, no. 3 (1991); Sophie Loidolt, "The Question of Reality under Modern Conditions. Arendt's Critique of the Phenomenological Tradition, A Close Reading of 'What Is Existenz Philosophy?'" *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 34, no. 2 (2013).

This stance of “detached involvement” may appear puzzling but, without debating Arendt’s own internal consistency,<sup>28</sup> here we can at least see how it is coherent with the need of respecting the autonomy of politics, both as a domain of action and as an object of knowledge, which would be impinged upon both by the partisan point of view of the actor and by the aloofness of the philosopher (or social scientist) imposing external standards of understanding. This means that both the moralizing approach of many theorists and the functionalist attitude typical of social sciences – *i.e.* the meaning of a “thing”, or social phenomenon, is explained by its function – are equally to be excluded from a correct understanding of Arendt’s discourse. That happens also to be the proper stance to engage in conceptual analysis, eschewing the presupposition of both normative and technical/scientific goals that would produce a teleological/instrumental attitude, disanchoring the enquiry from the common world of linguistic use.

The detachment and the involvement of Arendt’s stance are indeed one and the same. It is only by abstaining from constructing our concepts in order to achieve our goals – be they practical or

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28. Arendt’s notion of judgment, and her peculiar appropriation of Kant, have been a matter of contention amongst scholars for decades: Ronald Beiner, “Interpretive Essay,” in *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Seyla Benhabib, “Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics in Arendt’s Thought,” *Political Theory* 16, no. 1 (1988); Peter J. Steinberger, “Hannah Arendt on Judgment,” *American Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 3 (1990); Lawrence J. Biskowski, “Practical Foundations for Political Judgment: Arendt on Action and World,” *The Journal of Politics* 55, no. 4 (1993); Alessandro Ferrara, “Judgment, identity and authenticity: A reconstruction of Hannah Arendt’s interpretation of Kant,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 24, no. 2-3 (1998); Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves, “Arendt’s theory of judgment,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana R. Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); George Kateb, “The Judgment of Arendt,” in *Judgment, Imagination, and Politics: Themes From Kant and Arendt*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); Linda M.G. Zerilli, ““We Feel Our Freedom”: Imagination and Judgment in the Thought of Hannah Arendt,” *Political Theory* 33, no. 2 (2005); Max Deutscher, *Judgment After Arendt* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); David L. Marshall, “The Origin and Character of Hannah Arendt’s Theory of Judgment,” *Political Theory* 38, no. 3 (2010). For recent sympathetic and, respectively, critical positions see: Annelies Degryse, “Sensus communis as a foundation for men as political beings: Arendt’s reading of Kant’s Critique of Judgment,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 37, no. 3 (2011); Matthew C. Weidenfeld, “Visions of Judgment: Arendt, Kant, and the Misreading of Judgment,” *Political Research Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (2013).

theoretical, direct political involvement or the construction of explanatory theories – that we can assume a perspective internal to the linguistic context, to the world we have in common with other speakers who do not share our particular ends, which is necessary to understand concepts as they are employed within languages. The position of ends which would ground the teleological construction of specialized concepts, be it directed at political persuasion or scientific theorizing, is the logical operation that separates us from shared meanings. An operation, to be clear, that has its legitimacy and usefulness, just not for understanding what we, as speakers of natural languages, mean when we use common words, like “power”, whose meaning cannot plausibly be restricted to a technical jargon.

The description of an appropriate stance to engage in conceptual analysis, however, still tells us nothing about the method Arendt employed from this peculiar perspective.<sup>29</sup> According to her biographer, Arendt once said: “I am a sort of phenomenologist ... but, ach, not in Hegel’s way – or Husserl’s”.<sup>30</sup> We are not told exactly what “kind of phenomenologist” she was, but the obvious guess is that this was an oblique reference to her teacher Heidegger who, against his own mentor Husserl, re-defined the meaning of phenomenology at the onset of his masterpiece.<sup>31</sup>

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29. Here, we will focus on the methodological aspects that are closer to our preoccupations with power, which however, I would argue, is the central concept for Arendt as well. For a broader engagement with Arendt’s largely implicit methodology and its implications for political thought, see: Steve Buckler, *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory: Challenging the Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

30. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt. For Love of the World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 405.

31. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, § II.7. The literature on the relationship, philosophical and personal, between Arendt and Heidegger is vast, : Margaret Canovan, “Socrates or Heidegger? Hannah Arendt’s Reflections on Philosophy and Politics,” *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990); Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Jacques Taminiaux, *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker: Arendt and*

In short, with considerable simplification, Heidegger's phenomenology is a method to unveil our basic ways of being, not through metaphysical abstractions, but rather starting from observing our practical comportment – in this sense an inversion of Husserl's *epoché*, or the “bracketing” of judgment on the external world.<sup>32</sup> *En route* to this enquiry, a set of “existentials” are uncovered, allegedly describing the *a priori* of our own mode of being, just as Kantian categories purportedly defined the *a priori* of our perception of the objective world (neither of them, it should be noted, belonging to metaphysics in the classical sense). Heidegger, in a sense, takes his cue from Aristotle in considering his own version of “categories” as a sort of *summa genera* of Being. Such Being being the *Dasein*, though, the appropriate method is closer to a Kantian transcendental enquiry than to Aristotle's positing of the categories as metaphysical objects.

Arendt saw the force of this approach, and was deeply influenced by it, but the issue she had was that, despite the initial pragmatic orientation, Heidegger's solipsistic bent ultimately reproduced philosophy's typical unworldliness.<sup>33</sup> For Arendt, the world cannot be reduced to the

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Heidegger (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1997); Richard J. Bernstein, “Provocation and Appropriation: Hannah Arendt's Response to Martin Heidegger,” *Constellations* 4, no. 2 (1997); Peg Birmingham, “Heidegger and Arendt: The Birth of Political Action and Speech,” in *Heidegger and Practical Philosophy*, ed. Francois Raffoul, and David Pettigrew (New York: SUNY Press, 2002). The best short pieces to gather a basic understanding of the connections and differences probably are: Lewis P. Hinchman, and Sandra K. Hinchman, “In Heidegger's Shadow: Hannah Arendt's Phenomenological Humanism,” *Review of Politics* 46, no. 2 (1984); Loidolt, “The Question of Reality under Modern Conditions.”

32. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology* (Berlin: Springer, 1983), ch. 4.

33. This is a contentious characterization, but it is that which Arendt held, and therefore the one relevant for our discussion. The strongest assertion of this critique is perhaps in this summary of Heidegger's results: “Since I cannot be a world-creating being, it could perhaps be my role to be a world-destroying being.” Arendt, “What is Existential Philosophy,” 177. After this (the essay was first published in 1946), Arendt would never again be so acrimonious against her mentor, but the underlying problem with the unworldliness of philosophy, with Heidegger as the pinnacle of this unfortunate tendency, remained the same, see: Michael T. Jones, “Heidegger the Fox: Hannah Arendt's Hidden Dialogue,” *New German Critique* 73 (1998); Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, ch.7. Indeed, Arendt's celebrated “recovery of the public world” (Hill, *Hannah Arendt: The recovery of the public world.*), even while being inspired by her former

question of one's own being-in it, because it is understood in the first place as what is in-between people.<sup>34</sup> That is to say: it is not primarily a matter of a person-to-world relation, but rather a world may exist only within and through person-to-person relations, representing at once their condition of possibility.<sup>35</sup>

The exercise of work, as the violent activity that transforms nature into a more hospitable environment,<sup>36</sup> is necessary to build this world, which thus has an inescapable objective quality, but it does not exhaust it, for power exercised through action is necessary to keep the artificial world in continuous existence. The world-creating quality of work, including the work of art,<sup>37</sup> is recognized by Arendt, but her effort to separate and properly distinguish work from action is needed to avoid that an exclusive focus on the solitary goal-oriented productive activity, which would result from the unworldly philosophical attitude Heidegger relapsed into.<sup>38</sup>

While a phenomenological approach of this kind cannot reproduce the allegedly pre-interpretive universality of Kantian categories, the *Dasein*-centeredness of Heidegger's existentials would

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teacher, can largely be interpreted as a recovery from what Heidegger had done to the concept.

34. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 53-54, 182-183.

35. Thus, the public was a site of the inauthentic for Heidegger, the very opposite of the space where the "who" that we are is revealed through action and speech. See: Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, 130 ff.; Trevor Tchir, "Daimon Appearances and the Heideggerian Influence in Arendt's Account of Political Action," in *Action and Appearance: Ethics and the Politics of Writing in Arendt*, ed. Anna Yeatman, et al. (New York: Continuum, 2011).

36. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, §§18-19.

37. *Ibid.*, § 23.

38. Concerning Heidegger's reduction of political action to work/*poiesis*, see: Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, 219-224, 233-234. Villa presents the critique of a work-like conceptualization of the world as an intermediate step, in order to get to what in his view is the deeper Arendtean antagonism to Heidegger's tendency to retreat from politics into solipsism. I would rather reverse the point, since within Arendt's framework is the phenomenological condition of the working man that explains his solitude, which can then be philosophically absolutized into solipsism, and not vice versa.

not do either. To be politically relevant – that is to say, worldly – Arendt's concepts have to tread a middle way, so to speak, aiming at intersubjective validity but recognizing the possibility of variation, of being distorted, and even forgotten. The most daunting of said possibilities would concern power itself, which totalitarianism shapes into its own negation, perverting a most efficient organization into the destruction of any available possibility, by relentlessly enforcing impersonal laws of strict necessity.<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, the concepts Arendt tried to expound are not pliable to a constructivist approach, because they are neither arbitrarily created nor reducible to their socio-historical function, rather depending on the basic structure of our interactions, so long as more than one of us inhabited this world. Such a human condition is not metaphysically fixed – if we ever succeeded in leaving Earth behind us, for example, our condition would be radically altered<sup>40</sup> – but it nevertheless appears more stable than the ever-shifting ways of interests, cultures, and societies, as they can be examined by social scientists.<sup>41</sup> All the main concepts discussed by Arendt are of this kind:

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39. Employing the full extent of the “power of organization” in realizing the “hellish fantasy” of the concentration camps, in order to fulfill the “law of movement” dictated by ideology: Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 387 ff., 445-447, 464-466. Cf.: Arendt, *On Violence*, 50-52. It has been argued that Arendt employs different concepts of power, particularly in *The Origins* as compared to later works: Hauke Brunkhorst, “Reluctant Democratic Egalitarianism,” *Ethical Perspectives* 15, no. 2 (2008). While it is true that, in her earlier book, the concept is not defined as explicitly as it will be in *On Violence*, the focus on the categorial meaning of power allows us to see the coherence that Brunkhorst, in his attempt to map Arendt onto the very different approaches of Weber, Habermas and Foucault, missed. Moreover, in describing the “anti-political organizational-(imperial/totalitarian)power” used by Brunkhorst to make his case (*Ibid.*, 152.), what she actually wrote is that “power, as conceived by totalitarianism, lies exclusively in the force produced through organization”: Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 418 [emphasis added]. It seems unlikely that Arendt ever shared the understanding of power she attributed to Hitler and Stalin.

40. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Prologue.

41. Arendt's is indeed “an inquiry aimed at identifying the most enduring features of the *temporal* condition of man”: Paul Ricoeur, “Action, Story and History: On Re-reading *The Human Condition*,” *Salvagundi* 60 (1983), 61. Although the label of “philosophical anthropology” used by Ricoeur may be confusing, for it may be misunderstood as pointing to the objectification of a human essence.



categorial, in that they claim to define objective modalities of life and interaction, but also contingent and existentially relevant, as people can distort or forget them, thereby altering or diminishing their own possibilities. It is for these reasons that conceptual/definitional issues are so crucial for Arendt, in contrast to the prevailing attitude of contemporary political studies.

This stance is likely responsible for the disorientation felt by many Arendt's readers, who were left unable to grasp how she could so forcefully assert the validity of specific conceptual understandings, against what she saw as prevalent misgivings, without having any other ground than her own contentious interpretations of history and contingent experiences. This attitude is probably what generated the recurring allegations of "essentialism",<sup>42</sup> which would seem otherwise odd, given Arendt's explicitly anti-metaphysical stance.<sup>43</sup> We should be in the position to understand that no reference to essences is implied or needed; rather, the claims raised by Arendt's definitions are grounded in a transcendental enquiry– in Kant's, as well as Heidegger's, sense, opposed at once to both "empirical" and "metaphysical", in that it seeks the prior conditions of what is given – which starts from nothing more than "to think what we are doing".<sup>44</sup> Which is exactly what we are trying to do here, for the peculiar deed, but a deed none the less, of using the concept of power in our languages.

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42. Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (London: SAGE, 1996), 123-24; Tuija Pulkkinen, "Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Philosophy," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 28, no. 2 (2003); Andrew Schaap, "Enacting the right to have rights: Jacques Rancière's critique of Hannah Arendt," *European Journal of Political Theory* 10, no. 1 (2011).

43. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 10-11; Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Thinking, 211-212.

44. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 5.

Plurality is in this sense constitutive of all our practical experiences – as we still are beings-in-the-world, not abstracted subjects, this much Arendt certainly kept from Heidegger. This is not merely an abstract assertion, for such a plurality would necessarily be, if it were to have any stability, a politically and juridically organized one. At its starkest, this means that without law there would be no world properly so called:

All laws first create a space in which they are valid, and this space is the world in which we can move about in freedom. What lies outside this space is without law and, even more precisely, without world; as far as human community is concerned, it is a desert.<sup>45</sup>

From this perspective, law defines the boundaries of the world and creates ties between people who are themselves legally defined as persons, who cannot be touched except by legally defined means.<sup>46</sup> In broader terms, the most basic norms are linguistic, so that we must speak in a certain way, if we want to be part of a world shared with others, where we may understand what is spoken and entertain the representational thinking which is necessary to conceive of the mode of possi-

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45. Hannah Arendt, "Introduction Into Politics," in *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 190.

46. The two aspects, boundaries and connections, corresponds to the two ancient paradigms, *nomos* and *lex*, that Arendt juxtaposes to the modern idea of law as command: Arendt, *On Violence*, 40-41; Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 63-64. In recent years, after a long neglect, there has been an explosion of studies on Arendt and the law: Hans Lindahl, "Give and take: Arendt and the *nomos* of political community," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 32, no. 7 (2006); Alexandra Kemmerer, "Kelsen, Schmitt, Arendt, and the Possibilities of Constitutionalization in (International) Law: Introduction," *Leiden Journal of International Law* 23, no. 4 (2010); Lida Maxwell, "Toward an agonistic understanding of law: Law and politics in Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem," *Contemporary Political Theory* 11 (2012); Christoph Menke, "At the Brink of Law: Hannah Arendt's Revision of the Judgment on Eichmann," *Social Research* 81, no. 3 (2014); Marco Goldoni, and Christopher McCorkindale, eds. *Hannah Arendt and the Law* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2013); Anna Jurkevics, "Hannah Arendt reads Carl Schmitt's *The Nomos of the Earth*: A dialogue on law and geopolitics from the margins," *European Journal of Political Theory* (2015); Christian Volk, *Arendtian Constitutionalism: Law, Politics and the Order of Freedom* (Oxford: Hart, 2015). The deep connection between law and Arendt's phenomenology of worldliness, however, is not sufficiently emphasized, see mine: Guido Parietti, "Osservazioni circa diritto e mondo in Hannah Arendt," *La Cultura* 47, no. 3 (2009).

bility, both being basic conditions of power. Being able to speak, and to speak freely to each other, however, still presupposes an orderly condition which itself seems to require a legal order.

In a pragmatic sense, power is the result of concerted action, and as such requires mutual understanding without which it would be impossible to act together. In a transcendental sense, however, the capacity to think in terms of possibilities is predicated on the condition of a representational language which, as far as we know, requires the presence of a community of speakers. This is why, indeed:

... power is the only human attribute which applies solely to the worldly in-between space by which men are mutually related ...<sup>47</sup>

Power requires a lawfully ordered space in which it is possible to talk, and to mean what is said,<sup>48</sup> and has language itself – a shared language complex enough to permit representational expressions – as the most basic condition of possibility. Such conjunctions of concrete conditions and abstract conceptualizations are typical of Arendt's phenomenology. In the discussion of power, as elsewhere, they lead to an iteration between particular examples and general conceptual statements which may appear confusing. This is probably one of the reasons why her work, and her ideas about power in particular, have often been (mis)interpreted, criticized and/or co-opted, as if they were, or ought to be, descriptive sociological exercises.<sup>49</sup>

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47. Arendt, *On Revolution*, 175.

48. "Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.": Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200.

49. Starting from the influential: Jürgen Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power," *Social Research* 44, no. 1 (1977).

In fact, sometimes Arendt even speaks of power as a “phenomenon”,<sup>50</sup> seemingly the same vice we have here imputed to every other theorist, and tried to correct by recourse to her thought. This might not have been her most felicitous choice of words, but we should consider, first, that a phenomenon, in its Kantian sense, is not a thing or event existing independently, but rather an appearance as perceived by an observing subject, and, second, that while in a strict sense “power” is not the name of any phenomenon, the fact of being in such a condition as to have possibilities available is, instead, a proper phenomenon, the perception of which is recursively part of the meaning of power. The “sort of phenomenologist” Arendt was, thus, can arrive at abstract conceptual definitions only by way of examining concrete description of situations (real or hypothetical) as they are or may be perceived by the involved actors.

Here, for the sake of clarity, we are following a different path, separating the concept of power from the phenomenon of being in such a condition (though we are availing ourselves of examples), and within the concept itself we are also separating, insofar as possible, the syntactical form (here) from the semantic content (§2.2). This choice, largely motivated by the observed pitfalls of previous definitional attempts, has its costs, producing an artificially segmented discourse, which has to constantly introduce anticipations of points that are at once necessary to understand what is presently being said, and yet not properly comprehensible without it having being said already. The more integrated approach employed by Arendt does not have this problem; it rather results in an eloquent and engaging style. On the other hand, it has also been prone to deep misunder-

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50. Arendt, *On Violence*, 35, 82.

standings, a few of which we have here noted. Our different presentation strategy is also functional to render the conceptual definition comprehensible outside of Arendt's framework, though we would still contend that said framework, through the ideas of "world" and "person", does allow for better precision.

Phenomenologically, the world, while made up of work-created objects, is not itself an object with independent existence, since its being perceived as a world requires not just its materiality, but also that its appearances be shared by a plurality of persons. It must be a plurality, because on our own, without (language-mediated) interactions with others, we would have no means to be assured of the reality of our perceptions.<sup>51</sup> The perception of a world, moreover, implies an undetermined plurality of perspectives, because such world is in principle the stage for action, and therefore it cannot exist as pre-bound to any specific end/goal, no matter how general.<sup>52</sup> And it

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51. That we can be reassured of the reality of the world, and our own reality within it, only through our iterated relations with others, who appear to us as we appear to them, is a theme undergirding the whole of Arendt's thought, from the exam of the isolation created by totalitarianism to her later reflections on worldliness and solipsism in the *Life of the Mind*. For example: Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 438-446, 473-474; Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50-51, 58-59, 120-121; Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Thinking, 19-20, 46-48, 155-157. See also: Bhikhu Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy* (1984), ch.4.

52. This is why Arendt's concepts of world and worldliness (or, in a less developed way, Wittgenstein's notion of language game) are especially relevant for us, *vis-à-vis* other perspectives which similarly emphasized how our concepts are embedded in ordinary experiences and actions. Pragmatism, especially in Dewey, would have many analogies with the approach here pursued, anticipating Wittgenstein's idea that the meaning of language is in its use: Willard Van Orman Quine, "The Pragmatists' Place in Empiricism," in *Pragmatism: Its Sources and Prospects*, ed. Robert J. Mulvaney, and Philip M. Zeltner (Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1981). Pragmatism, however, remains informed by Peirce's original idea of meaning (quite close to the operationalism we examined in the first chapter) which cannot but see concepts as tools ordered to achieve some ends: Charles S. Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in *Illustrations of the Logic of Science*, ed. Cornelis de Waal (Chicago IL: Open Court, 2014). While this instrumentalism toward concepts is specifically criticized by Robert Brandom (Robert B. Brandom, "The Pragmatist Enlightenment (and its Problematic Semantics)," *European journal of philosophy* 12, no. 1 (2004).) even he defaults on a version of social functionalism (Robert B. Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy. Animating Ideas* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), Ch. 2.) which still falls under the more general instrumental approach to the study of concepts we have here criticized (*supra*, p. 6). Habermas' version of "transcendental pragmatism" (Jürgen Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Communication* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1998); Jürgen Habermas, "Transcendence from

must be persons, characters defined by their legally sanctioned freedom, freedom of movement in the first place, because other more substantive definitions – be they the naturalistic “human”, or the conventional/traditional ones based on kinship, religion, nationality, *etc.* – would not encompass the formal generality of this concept of the world.

These persons-in-the-world are the actors who have possibilities available and can represent them as such, and thus the subjects of power properly so called. The category of possibility applies to a subject only in this sense, as actors, for without the stage of the world to don our *personae* onto,<sup>53</sup> we would be left with necessity alone. At the extremes: the natural necessity of mere survival, or the artificial necessity of the totalitarian “law of movement”.<sup>54</sup>

Power would thus refer to the condition of a person whose representation of possibilities corresponds to the external intersubjective reality of a shared world. Representation is a key concept here, for it enters into the meaning of all the three main parts of the definition, person, possibility, and world. Possibility logically requires representation, in the sense of representing things as they

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within, Transcendence in this World,” in *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*, ed. Don S. Browning, and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1992).) would be more closely compatible with the perspective adopted here although, when applied to political matters, it flounders again on a teleological attitude, and precisely by misinterpreting power, as we will better see in chapter 4.

53. Arendt traces back the origin of the term to the Latin *persona*, meaning the mask actors wore on stage, made so that their actual voice could sound through, from which Arendt, and the Romans themselves, have derived the uncertain etymology *per-sonare*. From this origin, the term was metaphorically imported into the juridical discourse, before being later appropriated, with an almost complete inversion of meaning, by Christian theology. See: Arendt, *On Revolution*, 107-08; Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 12-13; Ayten Gündoğdu, *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrants* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 98-107.

54. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 461-65. A similar, if less extreme, “automatism” may be ascribed to the post-totalitarian conditions of the Soviet bloc: Václav Havel, “The power of the powerless,” *International Journal of Politics* 15, no. 3/4, *The Power of the Powerless* (1985). We shall more detailingly articulate the connection between possibility/necessity and a legal determination of personality in the last chapter.

could be, as opposed to what they are here and now.<sup>55</sup> Even such “here and now”, however, becomes our world, defining the scope of our possibilities, insofar as it is represented by/to ourselves by/to others through language. Our perception of what is or is not possible, of the world we inhabit, cannot be the perceptions of mere data, if there is such a thing,<sup>56</sup> for that does not allow for possibilities; the perception of our own possibilities (or lack thereof) has to pass through representations. Finally, the person is a fiction, the representation of an actor to whom power may be imputed; and it is because the person is such a fiction that it can be understood as the proper subject of power, without the metaphysical baggage that a depiction of a “real” subject would require.

The person and the world, understood in Arendt’s phenomenological sense, would be, so to speak, the lower and upper bounds of the “space of appearance”,<sup>57</sup> which is at once the space of what is represented, the space of the possible, the space where power can be created and exercised through action. Whatever is “below” the person – from neuroscience to essentialist conceptions of the subject – and whatever is beyond the world – from classical metaphysics to any theory assuming a perspective external to its object – is at once besides the domain of power, and therefore politics.

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55. Of course being can also be represented, as we constantly do whenever we refer to something linguistically, but it is at least arguable (even though we are not taking a position on this, here) that it can also be perceived in a more immediate way, whereas possibility is logically predicated on representative thinking.

56. Cf. Sellars’ classic critique of the “myth of the given”: Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (1997).

57. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, §28.

We are now in the position to see how this is both more precise and less onerous than the subjective/objective couplet we started with. This discourse, in fact, refers to intersubjective appearances, making no claim to metaphysical essences. Thus, we do not have to presume anything about the inner workings of the mind, within the subject; we would rather remain at the linguistic level where possibilities are represented.<sup>58</sup> The person to whom and by whom possibilities are represented is an abstraction in both the legal and the grammatical sense, whatever happens below the surface of such a person, in the mind of the subject (if there is such a thing), does not concern the meaning of power. Conversely, we do not have to presume a metaphysically objective assessment of the “actual” possibilities enjoyed by any actor – a particularly thorny issue, if anything because possibilities can be directly observed only *ex-post*, when by definition they are no longer so – because the scope of what is possible in the world can itself be assessed only intersubjectively, even though it may depend on “things in itself” we cannot access without conceptual mediation.

A definition of power in these terms, it should be noted, is compatible with other outlooks – including those based on a more onerous philosophy of subjectivity/objectivity – precisely because, by focusing on the interpersonal/phenomenological level, it remains largely agnostic about substantive metaphysical commitments. Thus, we hope to have gained a better (if still preliminary) understanding of the kind of concept that power is, a modality/category, as phenomenolog-

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58. This allows our account to not depend on intentionality, thus encompassing cases where power may still be present even when there is not, and there may never be, any intention to act. Incidentally, this also dissolves the longstanding diatribe between “systemic” and “agentic” conceptualizations of power, for power properly understood as a condition necessarily refers to the concept of a person (which potentially is an actor, but needs not to be for power to be present), and yet is not reducible to a “property” of such person.



ically applied to persons in the world, deepening but not contradicting the relatively more intuitive way of speaking we began with.

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In order to render Arendt's stance and its stakes comprehensible, we have here introduced various elements which may seem extraneous to the topic of defining power, and are certainly quite different from those most familiar to previous definitional attempts. Starting from the simple question of what kind of concept we are talking about, we arrived at an uneasy conjunction between Kantian transcendental philosophy and the Heideggarian brand of phenomenology, which are kept together by Arendt through the no less peculiar ideas of "world" and "person".

This, though, has been more than a digression. On the one hand, the concept of power as we use it, whether we care about Arendt or not, does in fact exhibit this peculiar character of being a modal concept, concerning at the same time our representations and our relations to others and to the world. On the other hand, and precisely because of the peculiar type of this concept, the focus on the world, and on the role of a normatively defined person within it, is relevant to understand power in general, not just Arendt's musings about it. It is, in fact, in the intersection between the shared perception – or, better, the shared representation of a perception we can be assured of only through constant relations with other persons – of a world made of objects, and our character as actors within it, that the concept of power has its specific meaning.

In other words, it is because Arendt – unlike others who tried to define our concept – is correct in her categorial understanding that we are using her example to introduce an unusual (however obvious, upon reflection) conceptualization of power as a modality of our interactions, as persons, with and within the world; even though such correctness can be shown only through the substantive work of spelling out the definition, a work which would in turn likely be incomprehensible if the correct type of the enquired concept were not at least tentatively introduced. This is not strange for conceptual analyses, as we have to have an explicit understanding of which kind of concept we are talking about before being able to explain it clearly (as we saw, we would not get anywhere by presuming that “power” denoted a kind of object), even though said typology is obviously dependent on the substantive meaning of the concept, and not the other way around.

To the analysis of said substantive meaning, once the appropriate standpoint has been introduced, we are finally turning our attention.

## 2.2. And its semantics

Discussing the meaning of a concept means observing the use of words. Words are not the same as the concepts they signify; any given word can be used with different meanings, and the same concept can be called by different names – as, for example, when the word “power” is used to refer to the narrower concept of domination.<sup>59</sup> Despite this difference, words are all we have, the

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59. Here we are taking “domination” as a shorthand for all forms of control (“the exercise of control or influence over someone or something, or the state of being so controlled” according to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*). Two more specific meanings will be relevant to our understanding of power. The first is power/domination as by

only matter we can work with – unless we claimed some metaphysical access to ideas; and even then, Plato himself had to painstakingly work his way through dialogues. Thus, we should be careful to avoid two seemingly common, if reciprocally contradictory, attitudes: dismissing apparent linguistic differences in favor of allegedly transparent conceptual connections or, vice versa, inferring conceptual unity simply from morphological similarities.

It is of course true that the same word “power” can refer to different concepts, a fact that sometimes has been used to justify the surrender to an irreducible “pluralism” of concepts, as we saw in the first chapter. However, this implies as little as the analogous fact that the word “tablet” refers at once to a slab of stone, a pharmaceutical pill, and a kind of portable computer. There are not three concepts of “tablet”, but rather obviously three different concepts referred to by the same word. Likewise, it is not that there are multiple concepts of power, but rather that the word is used to signify different, though often related, concepts – only some of which may happen to make sense upon closer examination.

However, the very fact that there is no such thing, or observable phenomenon, corresponding to the word – which denotes abstract concepts in all its uses, from politics to physics – tends to foster confusion. One can ostensibly show that an iPad and a slab of stone are different things, and most will promptly see that; it is just as simple to explain how the two got to have the same

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definition against the (true) interests of those affected, from which arises the idea of power as an essentially contested concept, as we have seen in Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*. The other is the neo-republican definition of domination as the arbitrary exercise of power over someone, from which the idea of freedom as non-domination is then derived: Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). For the moment, however, we need to focus only on the aspect of control over someone, leaving the more specialized concepts for later, see *infra*, pp. 174 ff.

name, as they are similar in being thin flat objects which may be used to store and transmit informations (with the intermediate steps of the paper notepad, and then *Star Trek*, in-between). No similar ostensive operation is available for “power” – deeply so, because even pointing at its effects, be it physics or politics, presupposes the idea that they are effects of power, not of something else – and therefore it is easier to lose track both of the distinction between the various concepts and of the reasons, were there any, for their being referred to by the same word.

An appropriate awareness of this difficulty, though, opens up the possibility to recognize the measure (not at all trivial) of implicit coherence embedded in ordinary language, which has been missed by previous attempts to tease out an explicit definition.

### 2.2.1. Representing possibilities (not potentialities)

“Power”, as it were, is a modern word.<sup>60</sup> If we cared for emphasis, we might say that it is the quintessentially modern word. Unlike the related but distinct concept of potentiality (which itself is an imprecise rendering of *potentia*), power has no exact translation in Latin – having cleared the way from the mistaken identification of power-over, control, *potestas*, with power as such – and while it is true that the Greek *dynamis* may have been very close to our modern understanding,<sup>61</sup> the re-

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60. This, to be clear, would not mean that the ideas we associate with power could not be present in the absence of a word with its precise meaning. It is more plausible, though, that the lack of a proper word had some hindering effect on the possibility of conceptualizing power, especially within intellectually rigorous discourses. We may see some of this in the way in which medieval philosophers and theologians could discuss about *potestas* and *potentia*, but lacking a precise fit for what is our concept of power, the idea as well was not so central for them as it may be for us.

61. The noun δύναμις is related to the verb δύναμαι, as well as to δύνατόν and δυνατότητα for “possible” and “possibility”, similarly as to how present-day Romance languages derive the words for “power” from the verb expressing the mode of possibility, as we shall see.

definition of the word operated by Plato and Aristotle has decisively changed its meaning for the tradition of Western thought.

The role of Aristotle, with the potential/actual explanation of motion,<sup>62</sup> and of the becoming of being in general,<sup>63</sup> is well known and does not need to be dwelled upon here.<sup>64</sup> We will just note how Aristotle's potentialities are defined by their being oriented toward an actualization. It is this "oriented-ness" that makes potentialities part of an account of being, rather than a contradiction to it, as they would have been in Parmenides and "the Megarians".<sup>65</sup> Such orientation is limited to the actuality of one result for natural/irrational/a-logical potentialities, whereas rational/linguistic/deliberate potentialities can be actualized into two opposites (*e.g.* medicine is a *dynamis* for both health and illness).<sup>66</sup> This characterization, which shift the meaning of *dynamis* from "pow-

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62. Aristotle, *Physics*, Γ.1-3.

63. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Θ.

64. We shall briefly recall how Heidegger, in his characteristically grand (but in this case quite apt) tone, noted that: "just this exposition of δύναμις and ἐνέργεια ἐπὶ πλῆθος is the decisive, basic discovery of the entirety of Aristotelian philosophy; δύναμις and ἐνέργεια, taken singularly, *obtain for the first time through philosophical inquiry an essentially other, higher meaning*": Martin Heidegger, *Aristotle's Metaphysics Θ 1-3: On the Essence and Actuality of Force* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 42 (emphasis added).

65. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Θ.3.

66. *Ibid.*, Θ.2. This, together with the fact that potentialities constantly shifts into actualities that may themselves be potentialities for something else, make it possible to extract from Aristotle a freer, more "kinetic" (dare we say, "dynamic"), account of human action. Thus, Jill Frank argues for a radical democratic reading of Aristotle, against the charge that his teleological philosophy tended to produce an authoritarian vision of politics, *cf.*: Jill Frank, *A Democracy of Distinction: Aristotle and the Work of Politics* (Chicago IL: University Of Chicago Press, 2005), esp. 46-50; Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, 42-52. Villa may indeed be too hasty in drawing the connecting teleology with a hierarchical and authoritarian view of action; even though it remains true that the latter implies the former the converse may not hold. Either way, we are here discussing the slide of meaning in the concept itself, not its political implications (which would, anyway, be mediated by uncountable different interpretations and applications of these ideas through the centuries), and at that level Frank herself reaffirm the relation of mutual necessity between *dynamis* and *energeia/entelecheia*, "There can be no activity without capability, but there can also be no capability without activity. Each depends on the other": Frank, *A Democracy of Distinction: Aristotle and the Work of Politics*, 47. The necessity implied by potentiality, as opposed to the undetermined openness of power properly so called, is what concerns us in the present analysis.

er” to the idea of a teleologically oriented potential, is further reinforced when Aristotle, somewhat enigmatically, notes that only those *dynamis* that are at some point actualized are to be counted as true potentialities.<sup>67</sup>

The point is duly repeated, but now directly applied to human history, by the most Aristotelian amongst modern philosophers:

The process of history thus appears, in its existence, to be an advance from the imperfect to the more perfect, but one in which the imperfect stage is not to be grasped abstractly or merely as that which was imperfect, but rather as that which at the same time has its own opposite within itself – *i.e.*, it has what is called “perfect” within it, as a germ or as the source of its drive. In the same way, the possibility points (at least in thought) to that which is to become actual: more precisely the Aristotelian concept of potency (*dynamis*) is also *potentia* for it is force and power.<sup>68</sup>

Less commonly observed is how the slide from *dynamis* as “power” to *dynamis* as potentiality already began in Plato, with his intent to make politics into a technique, or craft, instrumentally oriented toward justice and the good.<sup>69</sup> Such a shift is clear in *Gorgias* 466e-469e, and especially in the following exchange (468d-e) discussing the connection between knowing what is good and having real *dynamis*:

*Socrates:* Then since we agree on this, if someone kills a man or expels him from the city, or ex-

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67. *Ibid.*, Θ.4. Incidentally, Agamben had this point backwards – “it is necessary that potentiality be able not to pass over into actuality”, which is the direct opposite of what Aristotle wrote – in order to support his dubious genealogy of sovereignty: Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Palo Alto CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), part 1, § 3.3. Compare also with Arendt, supposedly a major inspiration for Agamben: “...the insufficiency of the Aristotelian explanation is evident: Can anybody seriously maintain that the symphony produced by a composer was “possible before it was actual” – unless one means by “possible” no more than that it was clearly not impossible, which of course is entirely different from its having existed in a state of potentiality...”: Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Willing, 30.

68. Georg W. F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History: with selections from The Philosophy of Right* (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 1988), 60.

69. *E.g.* Plato, *Republic* (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 2005), 332a-348a.

propriates him, whether he is a tyrant or a rhetor, thinking it is better for him, when in fact it is worse, he presumably does what he thinks fit. Isn't that so?

*Polus*: Yes.

S. Then does he also do what he wants to, if the things he does are in fact bad? Why don't you answer?

*P*. No, I don't think he does what he wants to.

S. Then is there any way such a man has great power in this city, since having great power is some kind of good, according to your agreement?

*P*. No, there's no way.

S. Then I was saying what is true, when I said it is possible for someone who does what he thinks fit in a city not to have great power, and not to do what he wants.”<sup>70</sup>

This passage is an example of Plato/Socrates' typical move of bringing their interlocutor to accept the “true” meaning of a word, in accord with his own reasoned assumptions but in opposition to the meaning held previously, before being subjected to the dialogue (Socrates' *elenchus*, then developed into Plato's dialectic).<sup>71</sup> The unreflective meaning initially presented is likely to be one then current in Greek, at least as perceived by Plato, or else he would have had little reason in making it his polemical foil; while the assumptions attributed to the interlocutor are likely Plato's own (or at least in accord with them, even if they might have been held by the real-life counterparts of the characters).

We see how a *dynamis* as an available and otherwise undetermined possibility, much like our modern concept of power, is overtaken by a *dynamis* which is truly itself only when actualized in accordance with “the good” (the moralization of which, incidentally, is the greatest example of

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70. Plato, *Gorgias* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 38, translation by Terence Irwin.

71. For an exploration of these methods, see: Gary A. Scott, ed. *Does Socrates Have a Method? Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato's Dialogues and Beyond* (University Park PA: Penn State University Press, 2004); Jakob L. Fink, ed. *The Development of Dialectic from Plato to Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Plato's way of finding "true" meanings). Thus, even before the *dynamis-energeia* couplet came to define Aristotle's metaphysics, the term had already been reinterpreted teleologically, within an ethical-political context, by Plato.

Be as it may, what *potentia/dynamis* came to signify is not the generic power to perform, or not perform, any action, but rather the more specific concept of a potentiality oriented toward a defined end. To be sure, this pertains primarily to the specialized philosophical meaning of the term. It is perhaps possible to use "potential" in some contexts as synonymous with power, and conversely in English (though not in other languages, as we shall see in a moment) "power" is oftentimes used in the sense of an oriented *potentia*.<sup>72</sup>

Nevertheless, the influence of the philosophical meaning has been wide and deep, and to this day we would mean different things by saying "s/he has potential" or rather "s/he has possibilities (or power)". Explicitly or not, we always have a potential *for* something, whereas we can surely have specific powers to do something, or over someone, but the general idea of being powerful or "in power" does not necessarily imply any "for".

The two concepts may be related, either can be seen as a subset of the other, in that a potential may be a power to which the idea of a defined end (or set thereof) is added, or on the other hand

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72. This might have contributed to the fact that the most advanced elaborations on power arrives just at the point of equating it with *potentia* (as opposed to *potestas*), as we saw explicitly in Lukes, but also in Morriss' analysis of power as a "dispositional" concept: Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 73-74; Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, 14-28. However, this confusion may also be found in works written in languages that maintained the distinction, e.g.: Carlo Altini, *Potenza come potere* (Pisa: ETS, 2012).



a power may be seen as a potentiality, for certainly it is not an actuality,<sup>73</sup> the possible actualization of which are determined not by our account (“*logos*”, as in Aristotle’s medicine example) but rather by the actor who happen to have (be in) such power. In any case, there is scarcely any other concept more important than *potentia* for the teleological perspective that dominated pre-modern Western culture; it may thus be more than a coincidence that “power” without embedded ends, open to possibilities before an actor, did not find a proper and distinct name until vulgar languages, with their *Macht/pouvoir/potere/poder*, encroached upon the hegemony of Latin and Greek.

In both Romance and Germanic languages, “power” has the interesting characteristic of being the nominalization of a modal verb – another hint that it does not ordinarily denote any object or thing, contrarily to what we have seen being widely assumed. In languages such as French, Spanish, or Italian, the connection is immediate, as the nouns *pouvoir*, *poder*, *potere* are nothing but the infinitive forms of the verbs translating the English can/may. In German the link is slightly less obvious, to the point that *Macht* has been made to derive from *machen*, even though it shares the etymological root of *Möglich* (possible) with the verb *Mögen* (may).<sup>74</sup>

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73. Thus, Arendt could in a sense categorize power amongst the potentialities: “power is always, as we would say, a power potential [...] power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse. Because of this peculiarity, which power shares with all potentialities that can only be actualized but never fully materialized, power is to an astonishing degree independent of material factors, either of numbers or means.”: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200.

74. *Ibid.*

In English, the connection is obscured by the historical contingency that “power” has been imported from Latin via Normandy, with “may” and “can” both being Germanic.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, if and insofar as “power” accurately translates *pouvoir/poder/potere/Macht* – which it does, even though the reverse is not always true – we should be mindful of the verbal connection. Interestingly, such a proximity between power, possibility, and “may/can/being able to” extends to more distant language families. Thus, for example, classical Arabic, as well as contemporary Egyptian, has *qadr/qadir* standing both for “power” and the verbal form “can/may”.<sup>76</sup>

These correspondences are our clues for the meaning of power lying in the category of possibility, as modally applied to a subject – a meaning, though, which has to be discerned in actual use. This holds for the concept corresponding to the more general sense of “power”, while the

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75. *Poer/poeir* is the Anglo-Norman root, itself of Latin origin, from which both power and *pouvoir* have developed. Interestingly, middle-English already used *power* as a full-fledged noun, while the transition from the verbal form to a full nominalization was to happen only later in Romance languages (as late as the sixteenth century in Italian, as we shall see). This makes sense, given the comparative lack of verbal inflection in English, and the aforementioned fact that the actual modal verbs may/can are not morphologically similar to “power”. For example, in Chaucer “power” is already something that can be “hadde” (*The Canterbury Tales*, Group A, *Prologue*):

... And eek with worthy wommen of the toun,

For he hadde power of confessioun,

As seyde hymself, moore than a curat ...

76. I owe this observation to professor Marc Sable, to whom I am grateful. For some reason, *Al-Qadir* and *Qadirun*, as names for God, are translated in English as “all-powerful” or “all-capable”, whereas they correspond to the Christian term “almighty”, which is just another example of the prevalence of a conceptual nexus through different languages. Interestingly, the connotation of all-powerful is tenuous, if at all present, in the uncertain meaning of *El Shaddai*. One interpretation derives *Shaddai* from *shadad*, meaning “to overpower”, “to treat with violence”, “to lay waste.” From this emphasis on domination or violence the *Septuaginta* may have got its παντοκράτωρ (e.g. *Job*, 5:17), although most instances simply have “Θεός σου” (“your God”). It is then probably from παντοκράτωρ that the *Vulgata* got its *omnipotens* – such as in *Genesis* 17.1: “Dominus dixitque ad eum ego Deus omnipotens ...” – which became standard and later passed in English as “almighty”, and in other languages is analogously rendered with terms etymologically connected to power/possibility in the broader sense, rather than with the violent/coercive connotation which might have been in the original Hebrew and was maintained in the Greek choice of *kratos*.

word itself can be used to cover more specific meanings, which may be more or less closely (rarely, if ever, not at all) related to the general one. The most common of such alternative meanings, which we have already encountered and to which we will return time and again,<sup>77</sup> is that of “power” as a form of domination, or control over others. Since we do not always reflect adequately on the concepts we use, this has led to various confusions, especially through translations. For example, the Russian word *vlast* apparently corresponds closely to this secondary meaning, but not to the more general “power” as can/may.<sup>78</sup>

It would be fascinating, if perhaps epistemically irresponsible, to try to draw conclusions concerning the ways in which such idiosyncratic linguistic facts may reflect or influence what can be thought, and therefore done, through different languages. However, our present interest lies merely in clarifying that, while each language will have its own peculiar semantics, which may affect the very possibility of employing the same concept across translations, still there are such words describing the concept of power we are here discussing. Words that, as a matter of fact, hold a similar association with the modal verb denoting possibility across languages as different as Italian, German, and Arabic. As already mentioned, the semantic correspondence is not morphologically apparent in English,<sup>79</sup> but one has only to consider whether the concept of power could

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77. See especially *infra*, § 4.1.2.

78. Valeri G. Ledyayev, *Power: A Conceptual Analysis* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1998), 42-44; Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, xv-xvi.

79. Thus Morris could make the curious observation that: “[...] ‘power’ is primarily a noun. (The verb ‘to power’ does exist, meaning ‘to provide power’ or ‘empower’. It is certainly common to form verbs from nouns in this way – for instance ‘to house’ – but the verb only has meaning through the noun, as it were [...]): Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, 9. The exact opposite is true for the case of “power”.

meaningfully be applied to someone who “can not”, or how the idea of having possibilities available is implied by the ordinary meaning of being powerful.

To better capture the verbal condition-defining quality of power in the English language we could point to the may/might correspondence. But even that might not be precise enough. It would perhaps be better to think by analogy with verbs having a present continuous form, and which semantically denote a state or condition. The best candidates for the analogy would be verbs like “to do” or “to be”. Power is akin to “being” or “to be in the doing”, or any similar expression denoting a condition we may find ourselves into. In a sense, the mere “being” is a better analogy, insofar as it stresses a purely modal, contentless, condition. On the other hand one “is” or “is not” powerful which and this, even if such “is” are meant as purely copulative, might generate unnecessary confusion.

Thus, it might be better to analogize with expression such as “being in the doing”, “being in the making”, *etc.*, so that “power” could be spelled out as the state of “being in the having of possibilities (and representing them as such)”, were that not such an awkward expression.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the point is that power’s character is in-between the two kinds of examples, defining a condition which is more abstract and general than “doing” *etc.*, but also, seemingly, less so than “being”, be-

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80. This, it should be noted again, is the result of the aforementioned quirkiness of the English language. In Italian, French or Spanish, it is immediately evident that “*potere/pouvoir*” are grammatically akin to “*fare/faire*” (to do) or “*essere/être*” (to be), as they all are the infinitive form of the respective verbs.

cause, at least in our languages as we speak them today, one has to “be” before “being powerful/ having power”.<sup>81</sup>

Once the category of possibility, through the connection with the modal verbs denoting it, has been placed into focus, the more specific meanings of the word “power” can be easily connected to the general one. The understanding of power as domination/control is readily comprehensible as the objectified conceptualization of the situation in which someone has the possibility to affect or limit the set of possibilities available to someone else. This, incidentally, promptly conceptualizes the Foucauldian “discovery” of the power/resistance or power/freedom nexus.<sup>82</sup> Having power, in this sense of control over others, ordinarily means having the possibility to curtail or steer someone else’s possibilities, that is to say, their power.

The alleged relational, though often asymmetrical, character of power properly refers to the relative difference between the possibilities available to certain actors and those available to others. And if they had no possibilities/power/freedom available to begin with, there would be nothing to exercise power over, just as Foucault diagnosed:

... there is no face-to-face confrontation of power and freedom, which are mutually exclusive (freedom disappears everywhere power is exercised), but a much more complicated interplay. In this game freedom may well appear as the condition for the exercise of power (at the same time its precondition, since freedom must exist for power to be exerted, and also its permanent support, since without the possibility of recalcitrance, power would be equivalent to a physical

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81. This mirrors Arendt’s phenomenological focus on the human condition, which is indeed a condition of power/possibility, distinct both from an eternal metaphysical essence and from a fleeting socio-historical construction, as observed in the previous section.

82. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol.1*, 95-96. See also: Heller, “Power, Subjectification and Resistance in Foucault.”

determination).<sup>83</sup>

Likewise, the idea of power as de-personalized, or de-faced,<sup>84</sup> may be understood as a consequence of the initial reification. The first step makes the word “power” into a metonymy for the whole situation described by “someone has power over someone else”. After the concept has been so objectified, it becomes possible to think it may as well be detached from any reference to a subject/actor. Once we are speaking of power as if it were an object/phenomena, there appear to be no obstacle for such “power” being something that may or may not be attributed to an actor, just like a resource or a machine does not cease to exist, operate, or being available, for the sole reason that no one happens to own it at a given moment.<sup>85</sup>

We can certainly think of situations in which our power/freedom is affected not just by the powers directly attributable to others, but also by contextual factors enmeshing us and our alleged dominators at once. There is thus no intrinsic reason not to talk of “power” as subjectless, it is only a matter of how good our empirical accounts are at demonstrating the existence of such cases. *Per se*, there would be nothing wrong in using this quite distinct concept we came up with, and we could denote it by the same word for the more general idea of power – even though its

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83. Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982), 790. It should be noted, however, that here as elsewhere Foucault overemphasize his opposition to the mainstream. For example, the idea that relationships of subordination entails elements of mutuality, including the freedom/power of the subjected part, is explored at length by Simmel, and has a more distant precedent in Hegel’s well known master-slave dialectic: Georg Simmel, “Domination and Subordination,” in *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms, 2 volume set*, ed. Anthony J. Blasi, Anton K. Jacobs, and Mathew Kanjirathinkal (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009); G. W. Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977), 111-119 (§§ 178-196).

84. Hayward, *De-Facing Power*.

85. We shall return more diffusely on the reification of the meaning of power, particularly under its aspects of power-over/domination (*infra*, § 4.1.1).

meaning may end up being almost the opposite – provided we were still able to maintain a clear enough distinction. The latter, however, does not seem to easily come by once the different concepts are commingled into a single word, and the usual outcome, as we have observed, is that the meaning of “power” is forgotten by both theoretical and empirical approaches.

As a result of this forgetfulness, it may appear “radical” to discover empirically what is indeed the logical consequence of a metonymical objectification of a modal concept. It is then all the more enticing to re-discover that power, the subject, and freedom are inextricably bound together. Power, thus, is no longer a negative term,<sup>86</sup> but it becomes creative, and the productive side of the subjection/subjectification process can be aptly emphasized.<sup>87</sup> There remains just one step to take, if we dare: to recognize the tautology that one, as a subject, has power/freedom/possibilities because and insofar one, as a subject, has power/freedom/possibilities.

The irony, it must be understood, is limited to the confusion between the empirical and the conceptual level of analysis; which is not to say that the substantive points are wrong or uninteresting. While this would be another large debate unto itself, it seems quite clear (in no small part thanks to Foucault) that we and our possibilities are affected by contexts and configurations of relative powers, therein including our formation as free/powerful subjects, which are not cogniz-

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86. Which it was, in a clear tension with its meaning in ordinary language, only within the framework that reduced it to power-over or domination, see *infra* § 4.1.

87. Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 194.

able without appropriately critical historical inquiries, while at the same time not necessarily being imputable to any individual or collective actor.<sup>88</sup>

In many cases, social structures have the effect to oppress some people, usually to the advantage of others who may benefit from the situation even while not doing, maybe not even being able to do, anything about it. If we so wished, we might gather such cases, alongside others where power is imputable to persons, under the label “power”.<sup>89</sup> But what is more interesting is how a proper conceptualization may let us to appreciate the difference between instances of domination going along with power (*i.e.* the dominants may choose to exercise, or not exercise, their domination, or even renounce it altogether) and those where the two terms part ways, where the domination effected by a social configuration is not at the disposal of the dominants’ power.

For example, panoptical surveillance,<sup>90</sup> which can now be applied on an unprecedented scale through technological means, does create an asymmetry between our power and that of our surveillants, to which to some extent we can resist, but the entire apparatus may or may not be at the disposal of the dominating actors. It is an interesting empirical question whether, and on what conditions, the NSA, the President, Congress, or even “society” at large (if there is such a thing), would have the power to shut down surveillance if they so wished – assuming they could so wish

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88. For example, see the critique of the “neo-Republican” concept of domination: Yves C. Zarka, “Le maître anonyme,” in *Métamorphoses du monstre politique: Et autres essais sur la démocratie* (Paris: PUF, 2016).

89. We could, however, simply note that “structures do not ‘exercise’ power as persons do; rather, they rely on and provide opportunities for exercising it”: Rainer Forst, *Normativity and Power: Analyzing Social Orders of Justification* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 45.

90. Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, part 3, ch. 3.



to begin with. Having an orderly understanding of the concepts we use does not, of course, suffice to solve empirical disagreements; here as elsewhere, however, it is a necessary condition to make them intelligible.

The connection between the general meaning of “power”, as the modality of possibility persons may find themselves into within a world, and the more specialized uses of the same word can be traced beyond the domain of political and social interactions, even up to the meaning of “power” as a physical quantity. We are chiefly interested to power as relative to politics, thus interactions amongst people, but the distinctions and the connections with its meaning as referred to the material world are easy enough to tease out. The power of an engine, or of a punch – be it meant in the precise sense of the physical quantity, or as a vaguer reference to how forceful things may be – refers to the magnitude of the effects that such things can produce. This may still not be the full-blown equivalence of power with causation, as desired by Hobbes (though it would be, if we shared his mechanistic reductionism),<sup>91</sup> but it is close to it, since this power in the material world is nothing but the potential to cause determinate effects.<sup>92</sup>

Perhaps with an interesting perversion of Hobbes’ intentions, such causal-like meaning of power is also commonly associated with an at least vestigial references to final causes, as the kind of effects that can be determined are typically limited to one, which is then part and parcel of the definition of what that particular power is. In physics, power is the work/time ratio or, equivalent-

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91. *Infra*, p. 119, fn. 20.

92. Thomas Hobbes, *De Corpore* (1655), X.1. Through this connection, as we will better see in the next chapter, the modern attempt to study politics under a scientific-causal model may be seen as a subset of the conceptual banishing of possibility and power attempted by Plato and, to a lesser extent, Aristotle.

ly, the rate at which energy is employed, and there is nothing else that this “power” can be actualized into. Likewise, in more ordinary language, the power of an engine does one thing only: it moves the machine.

In other languages, such as Italian and French, both the physical quantity and this ordinary meaning of power are indeed called by a more revelatory name, not *potere* or *pouvoir*, but rather *potenza* and *puissance* (which would be “potency”, not quite “potentiality” nor “potential”, were that term not limited to a few specific meanings in English), the same word as in *potentia* and *actus*, *dynamis* and *energeia*, potentiality (potency) and actuality in Aristotelian philosophy. Fittingly, the power-*potentia* of the engine is realized in the act of moving the machine, just as the physical quantity of power is actualized in the energy employed in a given amount of time.

This concept of “power”, as a potentiality, is related to the power amongst people we are most interested in through the reference to the category of possibility, but differentiated by the fact that such possibility is not open before an actor, but rather bound to a specific actualization (or set thereof). Relaxing this condition, and along with it the connection with either efficient and/or final causality, does in fact bring the concept closer to the one that interests us when talking about politics. Such relaxation is not exactly like the shift from one to many possible results – for if we were simply talking about an exhaustive numbering of all possibilities, their set could still be characterized as the necessary actualization of an oriented potential<sup>93</sup> – but rather closer to the blurring of the distinction between one result (which in principle could be objectively individuat-

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93. We shall discuss this point further while examining the difference between “possibility” and “probability” in §3.2.

ed) and an indefinite variety of available possibilities – which conceptually requires a subject to whom they are so available. This widening of the idea of potentiality toward a less definite set of possibilities, thus, coincides at once with the introduction, at least implicit, of a character to whom such possibilities, and the choice between them, are attributed.<sup>94</sup>

The description of the actualization of a potentiality, as just one specific effect, is always context-dependent, and precisely dependent on how stringent the teleology applied to produce such characterization is. It is possible to say that a car is powerful, meaning that it opens up a series of possibilities, perhaps pragmatically connected with the power/*puissance* of its engine in the physical sense. A car may have the power of improving someone's social status, opening up options for travel and work, attracting sexual partners, *etc.* It is unusual to refer “power” to a car in this sense, but it is still intelligible (think of the “power” that a “brand” can have). Insofar as such powers are connected with the physical power of the car (you may travel more comfortably in a SUV than in a city car, and perhaps attract more partners with a hp-richer sport car than with either of those), it may become difficult to individuate the line between power as the possible cause of determinate effects and a more general power of bringing forth or influencing an indeterminate range of outcomes an actor may try to achieve.

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94. Again, this was recognized, implicitly and perhaps unwittingly, by Hobbes himself (*Ibid.*), given how he relegated the merely linguistic distinction between the concepts of *causa* and *potentia* to the two factors of the reference *ad agens* and to temporality; the latter meaning that a “cause” is inferred by the effect, and thus is in the past, while the *potentia* is usually relative to effects still to be actualized, but this distinction itself is intelligible only from the point of view of an actor situated in time. See also: Carlo Altini, “‘Potentia’ as ‘potestas’: An interpretation of modern politics between Thomas Hobbes and Carl Schmitt,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36, no. 2 (2010), 245-46.

Similarly, the physical quantity “power” is precisely and uniquely the amount of work that can be done in a given time but, if we shift our focus away from physics, it is obvious that this one actualization of power may translate into a variety of different outcomes from an actor’s point of view. The 85W of power (*puissance/potenza*) of my laptop’s charger can do one thing only, moving around electrons up to the rate of 85W, but this allows me to use the computer, with which I can pursue any number of different goals – amongst them, writing these words – thus in some measure enhancing my power in the broader sense (*pouvoir/potere*); so long, that is, as I represent such uses of the computer as, for me, possible (neither necessary nor impossible). Again, it is not usual to speak in such terms, but is it not incomprehensible to say that the 85W of power are, in a way, also the power allowing me to perform a largely undetermined set of tasks with my computer. Without the position, at least implied, of one or more persons, the physical power is a potentiality which can be actualized in only one way; through the character (*persona*) of an actor, many possible outcomes, indeed an indeterminably infinite set,<sup>95</sup> of such physical power can be entertained.

Now, there are cases in which this shift from a determinate end to a set of possibilities relative to an actor does not sound as awkward as in our car example, but rather correspond to ordinary linguistic use, and many such cases are relevant for politics. Just think of expressions like “struggle for power”, “power-play”, “great Powers”, or “power politics”.<sup>96</sup> Here power is still relatively close to

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95. *Infra*, pp. 142-146.

96. An expression, this last, which, while being the translation of *Machtpolitik*, does not have a precise, non-awkward, equivalent in French (or other Romance languages for that matter): Aron, “Macht, Power, Puissance: Democratic Prose or Demonic Poetry,” 105n.

potentiality or causation, and it is often possible to give a description, or theory, pointing to a result which may be conceptualized as singular and pre-determined. For example, the gist of political realism is that “the Powers” are in a perennial struggle for power,<sup>97</sup> and whatever power they may have or acquire, they will use to acquire even more power (or be destroyed trying).<sup>98</sup> Such power, like the physical quantity, still produces exactly one effect, if examined from a sufficiently abstract and “realistic” point of view.

Attempts to argue that a Great Power should perhaps use its power to end or mitigate the endless power-struggle may be dismissed as naive, constructivist, and unwise to the real realities of power. Ultimately, such attempts would be misguided in the sense that they would impute power/*pouvoir*, which presupposes an actor, to what is by hypothesis conceived as an objective causal link within the “realistic” theory of politics. However, a Great Power is so named insofar and because it has a comparatively large array of possibilities at its disposal, while an inferior Power would have less, and neither would be “a Power” if they were not conceived of as actors, who can choose their course of action, as opposed to being determined by the web of causes they are enmeshed with.

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97. This defining point remains constant across competing versions of political realism, e.g. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading Ma: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

98. At least in this sense, Hobbes was indeed the prototypical realist, “So that in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death. And the cause of this, is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight, than he has already attained to; or that he cannot be content with a moderate power: but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more.” Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: or the Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill* (1651), XI.2.

In this case, the slide from a determinate effect, or set thereof, to an indeterminate space of possibilities, while still depending on a shift in perspective, appears seamless and does not sound awkward, to the point that it is usually not noticed at all and the two meanings are mixed into a single concept (perhaps making political realism inherently unstable). Again, in many cases such meaning would still be covered by *potenza* in Italian and *puissance* in French:<sup>99</sup> “Great Power” is translated as *grande potenza/puissance*, not *grande potere/pouvoir*.

This, it should be noted, is the proper difference between the uses of *puissance/potenza* and *pouvoir/potere*. Much confusion on this point has been introduced by Raymond Aron, according to whom *puissance* would be the most general term and therefore the appropriate translation of “power”. The basis for this astounding conclusion was a dictionary definition (*Littré*) stating that *pouvoir* “simply denotes action”, while *puissance* designate “something durable, permanent”.<sup>100</sup> This, though, is flatly wrong, as *pouvoir* does not “denote action” any more or less than “power” does, so that the *le Président* surely has the *pouvoir* of dissolving the *Assemblée nationale* to call an election, as well as a large amount of *pouvoir* in general, partly thanks to all his particular institutionalized *pouvoirs*, regardless of such powers being exercised into action or not. Morriss has harnessed this confusion, taking *puissance* to be the most natural translation of the English “power”, in order to claim that, speaking of *pouvoir*, Foucault was not discussing power at all.<sup>101</sup> As we have

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99. “... lequel est appelé par ses membres *État* quand il est passif, *souverain* quand il est actif, *puissance* en le comparant à ses semblables”: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social* (1762), I.6.

100. Aron, “Macht, Power, Puissance: Democratic Prose or Demoniatic Poetry,” 104. The French *puissance* does indeed have the peculiarity of being employed in the general sense of ability, as referred to a person, which would not be idiomatic for the Italian equivalent *potenza*, but this is another matter.

101. Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, xvi-xvii. See also: Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 73-74, 88.

seen, it may be true that Foucault was not talking about power in its most general meaning, but the reason is hardly a translation error – if anything, Foucault's concept *pouvoir* was closer to that of *puissance* as a causal factor.

Interestingly, Machiavelli – often considered, if perhaps wrongly, a forefather of political realism – does not have *potere* as a noun, but only as the infinitive form of the verb. While, in Italian, the nominalization of *potere* occurs only later,<sup>102</sup> the Florentine is indeed an archetypical theorist of power.<sup>103</sup> Machiavelli reasons of power, coherently understood, all the more as he keeps it closer to the verbal usage. His language, lacking a ready-made nominalization of the verb, intrinsically emphasizes *potere* or *non potere*, “can” or “cannot”, the possibilities, open or closed, or apparently so, present before the involved actors. The verb constantly reminds us of an acting character, and it is therefore more resistant to being unduly objectified and de-personalized: I/you/we “can”, but there is no such thing as a “can-ness” without a subject. On the other hand, Machiavelli has another noun more closely corresponding to our modern concept of power, and that is *virtù*. A term fittingly opposed to a *fortuna* representing the impositions of necessity, and which is all the

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102. Surely by the time of Botero's response to Machiavelli: Giovanni Botero, *Della Ragione di Stato* (1589). There are still many echoes of the verbal form – such as we may say “the walking” without making “walking” into a full-fledged noun – but the shift from verb to substantive is already significant, so that Botero can write sentences that would have been self-contradictory in Machiavelli's language, for example: “... è forza che per gelosia della sua grandezza si opponga con ogni suo potere alla virtù...” [... it is necessary that he, out of jealousy for his greatness, opposes virtue with all his power...] (*Della giustizia del re co' sudditi*).

103. Incidentally, his stance in discussing political matters corresponds well to the Arendtean “detached involvement” we discussed: *supra*, p. 67.

more revealing in being the root of our “virtual”, underscoring the connection between representation and the modality of possibility.<sup>104</sup>

The Machiavellian word which in English is dubiously translated with “power” is, once again, *potenza*.<sup>105</sup> Looking at the uses of the term in *The Prince*,<sup>106</sup> we see that *potenza* (or “*potenzia*” in the early Italian language) is presented as a sort of causative force, most often referred to from a point of view external to that of the Power in question.<sup>107</sup> Similar to the modern realist use, as well as to Dahl’s definition, this *potenza* corresponds to a rather specific power, that of controlling or influencing others’ behavior in a causal manner. As such, this *potenza* is most often referred to from the point of view of those who would be subjected to, or affected by, said influence.

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104. In medieval philosophy, the word *virtus* was indeed used to mean “potentiality”, as in the proverbially mocked “*virtus dormitiva*” (Molière, *Le malade imaginaire*, 1673). Dorothy Emmet goes further, equating both *virtus* and its quasi-equivalent Greek *arete* with power as such (when understood as free from negative emotional connotations): Emmet, “The Concept of Power,” 22. This may be too strong in general, but it holds well for Machiavelli.

105. English translations may further muddle the waters by using “power” to translate “*dominio*” as well. On the other hand, this is in accord with the prevailing confusion between power and domination in contemporary English.

106. This, though, is less true in the *Discourses*, where the use of *potenza* seems to come closer to the modern, broader and less determined, meaning of *potere*. Admittedly we are talking nuances here, and the number of occurrences is not so great as to allow definite conclusions.

107. For example, in *The Prince*, Ch.3: “E’ Romani, nelle provincie che pigliarono, osservarono bene queste parti; e mandarono le colonie, intrattennero e’ men potenti senza crescere loro potenza, abbassarono e’ potenti, e non vi lasciarono prendere reputazione a’ potenti forestieri”; “né la potenza di Antioco possé fare li consentissino che tenessi in quella provincia alcuno stato.”; “Di che si cava una regola generale, la quale mai o raro falla: che chi è cagione che uno diventi potente, ruina; perché quella potenza è causata da colui o con industria o con forza; e l’una e l’altra di queste dua è sospetta a chi è diventato potente.”

Ch. 4: “... ma, spenta la memoria di quelli, con la potenza e diuturnità dello imperio ne diventarono securi possessori.”; “Perché, sendo quello stato creato da quello principe, sa che non può stare senza l’amicizia e potenza sua, et ha a fare tutto per mantenerlo.”

Ch. 25: “Similmente interviene della fortuna: la quale dimostra la sua potenza dove non è ordinata virtù a resisterle...”

This last passage, incidentally, well exemplifies how *virtù* closely corresponds to our modern concept of power, as distinct from *potentia*, which is an attribute of the necessity-like *fortuna*.



Here I do not want to focus on the “power-over” quality of this concept – though it is true that causative ideas of power/*puissance* lend themselves well to be interpreted as domination, as also evidenced by Dahl’s definition – but rather simply on the fact that, once more, this *potenza* is a power essentially actualized in one specific result, mostly self-affirmation at the expense of others. Then, of course, a Great Power/*Macht*/*Puissance*/*Potenza* may or may not have the power/*pouvoir*/*potere* to employ or not employ its own power/*puissance*/*potenza* – be it the “hard” firepower or the “soft” diplomatic and cultural powers<sup>108</sup> – but the fact that we may use the same word for both should not blind us to the difference between two concepts.

A familiar example is that of the Vietnam war. We know that the US were a Great Power, while Vietnam was not, and we surely know that the US had enough firepower (again: *potenza di fuoco*/*puissance de feu*, not *potere di fuoco/pouvoir de feu*)<sup>109</sup> to kill everyone there many times over. What the United States did not have, arguably, was the power to win that war, in no small part because they did not had the power/*pouvoir* to deploy all their causative powers/*puissances*. Those arguing that what was lacking was merely the willpower missed the point, because the collective willingness to do “whatever it takes” cannot itself be summoned “at will” by anyone,<sup>110</sup> not even

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108. Joseph S. Jr. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

109. Interestingly, German has *Feuerkraft*, which is one of many cases where a differentiated linguistic use may highlight conceptual distinctions. See also *Pferdestärke* for “horsepower”, or *elektrische Strom* for “electric power”. The flip side of having clearer distinctions is that the connection between the meanings of potentiality and power, and the unity of the concept of *potenza*/*puissance* as such, which are important to understand the uses of “power” as a physical quantity, may not be apparent in German.

110. Likewise, in the case of a revolution, “... the superiority of the government has always been absolute; but this superiority lasts only as long as the power structure of the government is intact that is, as long as commands are obeyed and the army or police forces are prepared to use their weapons”: Arendt, *On Violence*, 48.

the best and most competent leaders one could imagine.<sup>111</sup> Firepower, a *puissance* which can be actualized into violence and destruction, which makes up a significant part of that much power Great Powers have, may be applied as a means to a variety of objectives, although in another sense its actualization would necessarily result in one thing only: killing. Again, here we observe a rather seamless transition between two different meanings of the word “power”, and rightly so because they are related through the fact that the State, which has at its disposal all such firepower, does have her own *persona*, as an actress on the international stage.

“Power” in its determinate causative sense, a “potency” that can be deployed to produce an effect, is akin to the means that can be deployed to achieve a goal, as a proximal cause, but possibly, once it is related to an actor, to achieve many different goals as a distal cause, of course with an exponentially greater unpredictability. Thus, a weapon or an entire army have a certain potential for applying violence, but when directed by a political actor this specific means can be used to achieve a multiplicity of goals which cannot be determined in advance. This leads to the confusion of said means with power as such (a “vehicle fallacy”, as we saw),<sup>112</sup> but upon closer observation it rather shows how the crucial element in defining our concept is the presence of an actor with the possibility, that is the power, of deploying (or not) such tools of potential destruction for goals that the instruments, taken as such, does not determine.

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111. Compare, for example, the different perspectives in: Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (San Diego CA: Harcourt, 2007); George C Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013).

112. *Supra*, p. 24.

Power properly so called, as “the very condition enabling a group of people to think and act in terms of the means-end category”,<sup>113</sup> is necessary to even conceive of any instrumental application of the means of violence, or indeed any power/*puissance* taken in its causative sense. This determines the “fundamental ascendancy of power over violence”,<sup>114</sup> which Arendt diagnosed in the form of an empirical statement but which, according to the logic of her argument, would already be established at a conceptual level, since without a person in power, that is to say in the worldly condition of having possibilities and representing them as such, there would be no ends, nor any way to rationalize the means to achieve them.

It is of course a pragmatic possibility that the automation of the means could overtake power, and thus the possibility of relating said means to any actor’s ends. This might be the case when the push of a button can initiate nuclear annihilation, or when the logic of the means of production imposes itself over people’s power. These would be examples of automatic processes overtaking the possibilities for action (that is to say power), which so preoccupied Arendt.<sup>115</sup> In a different jargon we could talk of “systems” overtaking the “lifeworld” or “communicative action”,<sup>116</sup> an example of which could be the drive toward a globalized capitalist economy, alongside the reactions against it. Regardless of the better way to individuate and describe such phenomena, if and

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113. Arendt, *On Violence*, 51.

114. That is, up to the point when “the development of robot soldiers [...] would eliminate the human factor completely and, conceivably, permit one man with a push button to destroy whomever he pleased”: *Ibid.*, 50.

115. Starting from her diagnosis about totalitarianism’s developmental laws, as we saw: Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, ch. 13.

116. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2. Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

when they happen they do in fact place means/violence/causation above power/possibility, but in doing so they produce at once their own meaninglessness, divorcing the means from the end, thus confirming the conceptual primacy of power even while destroying it empirically.

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The contingent fact that *puouvoir/potere*, and not *puissance/potenza* became the decisive modern political concept,<sup>117</sup> does suggest something about a different possibility being open to understand politics, as compared to the teleological and other-worldly orders of thought prevailing in pre-modern ages, where no exact equivalent for the concept of power as such was to be found (with the possible exception of the pre-philosophical Greek meaning of *dynamis*). On the one hand, the nominalization of a modal verb facilitates undue objectifications of power – and that is true even in languages that, unlike English, maintained the noun-verb morphological connection – leading to “forget” its precise meaning. The same nominalization, however, gifts us an apt term to denote a categorial condition which would have easily remained implicit in the purely verbal use.

Thus, what “power” does is to open up two distinct options of modally understanding ourselves in the world, the one conceptually foreclosing action, the other emphasizing its possibilities.<sup>118</sup> Effectively, though, only the latter is specific to the term in question, given how objectified

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117. The alleged conceptual struggle between *potestas* and *potentia*, thus, is not central to understand the modern concept of power, which does not correspond to either of his two main predecessors: Altini, “‘Potentia’ as ‘potestas’: An interpretation of modern politics between Thomas Hobbes and Carl Schmitt”; Altini, *Potenza come potere*. Likewise, we would not say that power “straddles” the distinction between *potentia* and *potestas*: Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 73. “Power” denotes a third concept, which cannot be reduced to *potentia*, *potestas*, or a mix of the two.

118. Incidentally, this might be seen as the deepest root of Arendt’s ambivalence toward modernity, see e.g.: Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*.

forms of control have many other names (they are, in fact, simpler to individuate conceptually), while only “power” appropriately defines the state of having possibilities available and representing them as such.<sup>119</sup> Finding ourselves in this condition of having and representing possibilities before us, in the world that we share, thus doubly defining – inwards and outwards, if you will – our character/person as actors, is the meaning that the word “power/*Macht/pouvoir/potere/poder*”, and for us this word only, can capture.

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119. Indeed, “freedom/liberty” would in this sense be synonymous with “power”. However, freedom has largely been detached from its connection with a practical “I-can”, partly because it has been construed as opposed to “power-as-control” – at least from Hobbes to Berlin, but see also: Philip Pettit, “Freedom as Antipower,” *Ethics* 106, no. 3 (1996). – and partly because, in the philosophical and theological tradition, freedom has been re-located in the inner realm of the will: Arendt, “What is Freedom?”; Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Willing, 200. We will discuss the relation between power and different conceptions of freedom in chapter 4.



### 3. Power and political science: causality, probability, necessity

Political science is rife with methodological strife. There is, however, agreement on two goals that such a discipline should pursue: accurately measure political phenomena, and use the data so gathered to draw causal inferences.<sup>1</sup> Discord runs deep about the means to do so but, as evidenced by the manifestos of two opposite sides, those goals are broadly shared. Thus, from the “pluralists” we may hear:

Crafting good social science research requires diverse methodological tools. Such tools include a variety of qualitative and quantitative approaches [...] Yet diverse tools are not enough. Without shared standards, social science can lose its way. Shared standards help ensure that the application of these tools leads to meaningful conceptualization and measurement, interpretable causal inferences, and a better understanding of political and social life.<sup>2</sup>

And:

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1. Indeed, this corresponds to the idea of science as knowing being and the causes, or reasons (*aitias*), for it being as it is: Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A.1, 981a-b.

2. Henry Brady, and David Collier, eds. *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), XV.

In our own work we have written extensively on conceptualization and measurement, and indeed, assessing causes and consequences emphatically calls for careful attention to concept formation and operationalization. Yet the central concern here is with causal inference.<sup>3</sup>

While earlier heralds of methodological orthodoxy, then chiefly represented by inference through regression analysis, stated that:

Our goal is practical: designing research that will produce valid inferences about social and political life. [...] this is a book about research design: how to pose questions and fashion scholarly research to make valid descriptive and causal inferences.<sup>4</sup>

And, more sternly:

The social science we espouse seeks to make descriptive and causal inferences about the world. Those who do not share the assumptions of partial and imperfect knowability and the aspiration for descriptive and causal understanding will have to look elsewhere for inspiration or for paradigmatic battles in which to engage.<sup>5</sup>

Similar statements are common throughout the methodological literature.<sup>6</sup> This is no surprise, for they corresponds to the broadest definition of science, as a knowledge of that which is. Once causality is introduced, the general goal of political science may be stated as factual descriptions

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3. *Ibid.*, 3.

4. Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

5. *Ibid.*, 7.

6. E.g. Ian Shapiro, *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 2-7, 35-36, 199-200; Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, Henry E. Brady, and David Collier, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4-5; David A. Freedman, *Statistical Models and Causal Inference: a Dialogue with the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), xiii; Ger- ring, *Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework*, 13-15. Some go further, integrally reducing explanation to causality: Jon Elster, *Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 7.



plus causal inferences.<sup>7</sup> What may be lost in the obviousness of such aims is that, in focusing on what is, and furthermore is under some form of causality, they do not contemplate what may or may not be,<sup>8</sup> which would be the domain of possibility. Thus, by conforming to their image of the scientific method, political scientists tend to lose sight of power. Methodology has gradually eroded the very conceivability of what was once the focal center of the disciplinary domain.

As observed in our first chapter, doubts about the relevance of “power” go back to the Sixties,<sup>9</sup> long predating the drift of the concept away from the focus of political science. Such gradual removal could be an appropriate subject for an external critique of political science, according to which the discipline, captured by the functional imperatives of contemporary society, or the State itself,<sup>10</sup> tends to remove inconvenient topics by way of methodological refinement.<sup>11</sup> This sort of “ideological” critique, correct or not, is not the focus of the present enquiry. The work done in rendering explicit the meaning of power, instead, allows us to advance a more general observa-

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7. Descriptions can be inferential, as when a phenomenon is inferred from another, without the two being causally connected: *supra* p. 32; King, Keohane, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, ch. 2.

8. There is a growing interest in the use of counterfactuals to analyze political and social phenomena: James D. Fearon, “Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science,” *World Politics* 43, no. 2 (1991); Richard N. Lebow, “What’s So Different about a Counterfactual?,” *World Politics* 52, no. 4 (2000); Judea Pearl, *Causality: Models, Reasoning and Inference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Stephen L. Morgan, and Christopher Winship, *Counterfactuals and Causal Inference: Methods and Principles for Social Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). While a better appreciation of counterfactuals and conditional possibilities would be advantageous to any political study, it should be noted that counterfactual analysis is still employed to establish causality, which is to say a necessary connection between causes and effects.

9. Riker, “Some Ambiguities in the Notion of Power”; March, “The Power of Power.”

10. Theodore J. Lowi, “The State in Political Science: How We Become What We Study,” *The American Political Science Review* (1992).

11. See the indictment of “methodists” in: Sheldon S. Wolin, “Political Theory as a Vocation,” *The American Political Science Review* 63, no. 4 (1969).

tion. Regardless of the motivations for political science's prevailing methodological assumptions, we are in the position of comprehending them under the category of necessity, as opposed to possibility, and therefore to power.

It is important to understand the scope of the categorial, or modal, argument here pursued. While a methodological critique would be an interesting endeavor, that is not what we are doing here. The issue I am trying to place into focus is not that current methods to individuate causality are inadequate to describe the social world. They may or may not be, our enquiry is limited to the fact that an exclusively causal method – all the more so if it were perfectly adequate to describe reality – would be necessarily incapable of accounting for power and, consequently, of understanding politics as such.

Thus, I am not trying to uncover the errors, or rein in the excesses, committed under the general categories of causality and necessity, but rather more modestly to show that necessity informs one way to look at the world, and that such a way by definition does not contemplate possibility and power, therefore being *a priori* unable to capture the whole of politics – assuming that politics is about power, as most political scientists, at least informally, would still do.

Before moving on to the substantive argument, one more demarcation should be made explicit. While many of the methodological discourses here examined cut across different social sciences, here we are primarily interested in political science. However, the disciplinary boundaries are fuzzy, and the definition of political science is particularly problematic since, having lost sight

of “power”, the discipline has no viable concept left to determine its own domain.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in part we would operate under a normative concept of what political science should distinctively be – that is to say a systematic study of what has to do with power, that is to say politics – aware that this is not the way in which the discipline is presently understood.

Concerning this latter understanding, that is to say the discipline as it is actually practiced, we have to rely on self-descriptions, and we would privilege those that more clearly exemplify the methodological commitment to causal inference. Out of context, this might seem a “no-true-Scotsman” fallacy, as we are focusing on the examples seemingly more liable to our critique. Context matters though, and the fact is that an increasingly formalized conception of causal inference is dominant within the field, all the more so at its cutting-edge. On the other hand, even if this last contention were incorrect (or were to become so at some point in the future), it is indisputable that such an approach exists and informs a number of studies. Thus, our critique would still have a proper object, even if it turned out to be smaller than it appears to be.

In this chapter, with the aforementioned provisos, we will go back to examine in more detail the mistaken equation of power with causality, which we will gather under the more general category of necessity, as opposed to possibility. We will then dispel another potential confusion, since

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12. Leaving aside Schmitt – whose friend-enemy definition of the political is influential amongst theorists and philosophers, but not particularly heeded by empirical practitioners – another classic definition would be based on the State. That would not be viable, however, both because there has historically been politics without States, and because even now, with the rise of supra-national and non-state political actors, it would represent an exceedingly restrictive definition. Indeed, it was already problematic a century ago, when presented by Max Weber. His definition of politics, in fact, is at once circular and revealingly self-contradictory: it starts from politics as “any leadership activity”, goes on to say that not every kind leadership really counts, ends the paragraph stating that only “the leadership of a political organization”, being flatly equated with the State, is adequate to define politics. See: Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *The Vocation Lectures: Science as a Vocation, Politics as a Vocation* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 32.

at first glance the concept of probability, ubiquitous as it is, might seem to account for what is not necessary but merely possible. This impression is incorrect, as we shall see by observing the definition of probability and the ways the concept is interpreted and employed.

Having thus examined in some more detail the reasons for the drift of “power” away from the focus of political science, we will conclude by briefly examining the impact that a proper understanding of the concept would have on the practice of the discipline – assuming that politics is about power and political science ought to be about politics. Said impact can be summarized as a limitation of the domain of enquiry available to empirical/causal approaches (both quantitative and qualitative), given how “power” refers to a dimension of possibility which is not reducible to necessity. This will, in turn, pave the way for the parallel critique of normative approaches in political theory and philosophy, to be examined in the next chapter.

### 3.1. Power and causality

As observed in our first chapter, political science used to be very concerned with power, more or less universally considered the focal concept of politics. That is no longer the case. To be sure broad, and largely perfunctory, statements about the centrality of power can still be found; but now causality is the governing concept of the discipline. We may say with some confidence that what happened was indeed the substitution of causality in lieu of power, because there was a transitional period in which political science, then closer to its historical roots but already in the process of redefining itself, did flatly identify power with causality.

Dahl expressed such identification at its strongest:

... several of the key concepts of political science are strictly causal; it seems highly doubtful that we shall soon develop relevant explanatory theory that does not make use of these concepts. I particularly have in mind concepts of power and control [...] If among the definitional properties of a political system one considers the way in which power over decisions is distributed, and the characteristics [...] of the classes of persons to whom varying amounts of power are allocated, then one objective of political science is to formulate laws that will account for the distribution of power in the world of politics.

However, in political discourse, whether by Aristotle, Hobbes, or Lasswell, a relationship of power, influence, control, or authority is a causal relation among two or more human actors (individuals, groups, or other collectivities). One meaning in political discourse of the statement that “A has power over B with respect to X” is simply that A (under certain conditions) can cause B to act X (with a probability P).

To put the matter this way may render the notion of power rather peculiar as a central concept in political science: Does any other field of empirical investigation take cause itself, in this instance cause in interpersonal relations, as an object of study? [...] so long as we in political science are interested in human relationships in which an actor induces a response in other actors, we are also concerned with causal relationships.<sup>13</sup>

This conflation may have been due to Dahl’s tendency to understand power as influence, which itself is a causal concept, nearly synonymous with “cause” itself. But power and influence are not the same,<sup>14</sup> notably because “power” has a dispositional character, which we can now better com-

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13. Robert A. Dahl, “Cause and Effect in the Study of Politics,” in *Cause and Effect*, ed. Daniel Lerner (New York NY: Free Press, 1965), 88-89. This line of reasoning is fallacious, for it originates from an inadequate definition of power. As it happens with great minds, however, it fails in an interesting way, for it exemplifies the problems of the framework still informing political science. In this sense, Morriss’ objection to Dahl are technically correct, but largely misguided: Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, 44-45. Truly, equating power with cause and then wondering whether political science should study “cause itself” is absurd; and it would be equally absurd to pretend to study “power itself” as the object of an empirical discipline. The reason, however, is not just that “cause” and “power” are too broad, as Morriss had it, but rather that both are categorial concepts, neither of which denotes objects susceptible of empirical study. There is a difference between “studying power as such” and “studying phenomena which are associated with power”. The first statement is absurd, but the second is not. Dahl expressed himself imprecisely at times, but it is quite clear from the context that he meant the latter and not the former; and while he was wrong about the identification of power with causality, he was well within his rights in saying that the study of politics is the study of the phenomena associated with power.

14. *Ibid.*, ch.2; Steven Lukes, “Robert Dahl on power,” *Journal of Political Power* 8, no. 2 (2015).

prehend under the category of possibility, that “influence” lacks. As aptly noted by Ball, Dahl was initially wary of a full equivalence of power with causation, but ended up endorsing it,<sup>15</sup> and by then the equivalence was a common notion amongst political scientists.<sup>16</sup> The idea of such an identification gradually lost ground, even though as late as 1998 “power” could still be deemed “a subset of causation”.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, insofar as those not engaged in debates about power still commonly default upon Dahl’s definition, the notion of power-as-causation lives on to this day.

The meaning of “cause” is at least as contentious as that of “power”,<sup>18</sup> even though there seems to be a somewhat higher measure of operational agreement in the face of definitional disputes.<sup>19</sup> Here we would be able to merely brush the surface of debates about causality, trying to convey

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15. Ball, “Power, Causation & Explanation,” 193-94; Dahl, “The Concept of Power”; Dahl, “Cause and Effect in the Study of Politics.”

16. E.g.: Riker, “Some Ambiguities in the Notion of Power”; Quentin Gibson, “Power,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (1971).

17. Ledyaeu, *Power: A Conceptual Analysis*, 59. The connection between power and causality is crucial, and aptly continues to be discussed, see e.g. Isaac A. Reed, “Power: Relational, Discursive, and Performative Dimensions,” *Sociological Theory* 31, no. 3 (2013). The point is not to blindly juxtapose power to causality, but rather to understand their conceptual distinctiveness and, therefore, their relation.

18. For an overview: John L. Mackie, *The Cement of the Universe. A Study of Causation* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Margaret Mooney Marini, and Burton Singer, “Causality in the Social Sciences,” *Sociological Methodology* 18 (1988); Vaughn R. McKim, and Stephen P. Turner, eds. *Causality in Crisis? Statistical Methods and the Search for Causal Knowledge in the Social Sciences* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997); Nancy Cartwright, *Hunting Causes and Using Them: Approaches in Philosophy and Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Federica Russo, *Causality and Causal Modelling in the Social Sciences: Measuring Variations* (2008); Box-Steffensmeier, Brady, and Collier, *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*, Part IV; Phyllis McKay Illari, Federica Russo, and Jon Williamson, eds. *Causality in the Sciences* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Tad M. Schmaltz, ed. *Efficient Causation: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

19. This seems to be the dominant view amongst both methodologists and practitioners, usually eager to avoid being embroiled in metaphysical questions: Henry E. Brady, “Causation and Explanation in Social Science,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*, ed. Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, Henry E. Brady, and David Collier (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). There are, however, important voices stressing the need to consider the philosophical, operational/methodological, and practical/applicative aspects of causality as a whole, e.g. Cartwright, *Hunting Causes and Using Them*.

how common assumptions, through different interpretations, make it so that any exclusively causal account would be intrinsically unable to capture power. Before getting to that, though, we have to dispel the aforementioned (mis)identification of power with causality. In doing this, it may be helpful to keep in mind the meaning of power as discussed in the previous chapter, even though just reflecting upon the informal apprehension of both concepts, as possessed by any competent speaker, should be sufficient to demonstrate our point.

Plainly, despite influential assertions to the contrary,<sup>20</sup> “power” and “cause” do not have the same meaning, even though the concepts they denote are in some relation to each other. When we say that *x* has power (or a certain specific power), we mean a different thing than when we say that *x* causes *y*. And we mean a different thing even when the power of *x* is precisely that of causing *y*. Thus, the sentence “the President, through his foreign policy, caused a war” has a different meaning from the sentence “the President has the power to pursue a foreign policy which would cause a war” or the more condensed “the President has the power to cause a war”.

Even in the physical domain, thus for the more restricted meaning of power as an oriented potentiality, it is one thing to say that such and such acid has the power-as-*potentia* to dissolve copper, and another to say that such and such acid caused the dissolution of some copper. If we go

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20. Hobbes, *De Corpore*, X.1; Ball, “Models of Power: Past and Present.” It is worth noting, however, that Hobbes’ “power and cause are the same thing”, was actually written as “*Potentiam, et causam idem esse*”, and thereafter “*Cause atque effectui respondent potentia et actus*”. Thus, Hobbes is first equating power with *potentia*, and then *potentia* with a “cause” that is now purely mechanistic. This is to be understood within the context of the rejection of Aristotelian philosophy, wherein it makes sense to take *potentia*, strip it of its teleological meaning and make it equal to “cause”, just as *actus* is reduced to “effect”. As we saw, *potentia* does share with the concept of cause the connotation that, unlike power, it is to be realized into one result, or a defined set of results. Thus, while it may make sense to take the two as synonymous if one rejects teleology as Hobbes did, taking either as equivalent to “power” is a further and separate step, which happens to be sharply in contrast with the ordinary meaning of power, both then and now.

back once more to consider Dahl's and related definitions we see that, even at their most "causal", they were of the form "x has power if they can cause y", with the meaning of power being (circularly, as we saw) embedded in the "can", and not in the "cause".

However, as the examples show, the two concepts are also related, in that if it were not the power to cause something, a power would not be power at all.<sup>21</sup> The absoluteness of this statement depends on how we defined causation (*e.g.* whether persuasion would count as a causative action) but, for a sufficiently broad definition, the meaning of power does indeed imply a reference to causing some effect. The relation is most apparent outwardly, so to speak, concerning what one can effect in the world, for having the possibility to do or achieve something implies (again, for a sufficiently broad understanding of causation) the possibility of causing that something. As a consequence, the whole configuration of what happens to be the case also bears as a cause of what is possible or impossible for anyone.

Even one's own representation of their possibilities might be reduced to causes of various kinds, from social, cultural, and psychological determinations, down to a full reduction of the mind to a physical mechanism. At the same time, it is possible to conceive of a power to affect self-representations; so that we could cause not only effects in the world, but also in our own representations of what is possible. It is, therefore, at least conceivable that power would be related to

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21. "Almost all definitions of power fundamentally link it to the ability to have an effect on the world, to make a difference, to cause things to happen": Hearn, *Theorizing Power*, p.3. Recall also Morriss' definition of power as a "capacity to effect": Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, 30, 36-38, 41.



causation both ways, implying the causing of effects and being itself the effect of some causes, concerning at once the worldly and self-representational application of the category of possibility.

Here we remain agnostic concerning all these points, as they depend on the conceptual issue of defining causation and on the empirical one of ascertaining causes in any contingent situation; both beyond the scope of this work. What is, instead, within the boundaries of an analysis of “power”, is to observe that:

1. “power” and “cause” do not have the same meaning;
2. their meanings are nevertheless related;
3. and yet a perspective exclusively focused on causality would be unable to capture power.

That power and cause are not the same is evident not only from their semantic content, but also by the mere formality of their being related, for any relation logically implies a distinction between its terms. Power does not denote a subset of causation for, while there are causes that do not involve power, there is no subset of “cause” which is coextensive with “power”, if anything because the very same cause can lie within the power of someone or not.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, for example, an impact with a rock moving at a certain velocity will break the glass, and a war will cause destruction, death, and misery. Throwing the rock can be within the power of someone, or the rock may randomly fall from a position of precarious equilibrium. In both cases the proximal cause of the glass’ breaking is the rock hitting it, but only one of them involves pow-

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22. Power-as-potentiality, however, can be considered as a subset of causation, or a superset as well, depending on one’s perspective. This is basically what the propensity interpretation of probability does: *infra*, p. 154.

er – even though both involve the potential for the rock to break the glass, but we have already discussed how potentiality and power are not the same.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, starting a war may be within the power of certain political actors, or may happen for systemic reasons in a way that leaves little power to those involved (whether that be the case for any given event, say WWI, is a historical question). In the first case it would be within the power of the relevant persons to cause the effects, or avert them, while in the second it would not, but in both the war would equally be the cause of death and misery.

“Power” and “cause” may appear together or separately, and neither is a subset of the other. A cause can certainly be conceived of without reference to power, whereas whether or not power may go without causation depends on how narrow or broad is our definition of the latter term; a point upon which we remain neutral. Given that the two concepts have different meanings, and given that causation without power is well conceivable, it logically follows that causation is not sufficient (though it may be necessary, depending on how it is defined) to understand power. By itself, this logical consideration would suffice to prove that any theory, explanation, or understanding, framed exclusively in causal terms would be unable to account for power. However, on such an abstract argument is unlikely to persuade the empirically-minded, while on the other hand causality is not just insufficient to account for power, but modally opposite to it.

Whatever precise understanding of causality we may adopt, in fact, the concept of a cause presupposes some sort of necessary connection between cause and effect. One could be a realist, un-

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23. *Supra*, pp. 85-89, 98.

derstanding causality in strict analogy with mechanics, so that true causal effects would only happen at the individual level,<sup>24</sup> and the results observed in a population would be in principle reducible to it. At the opposite, causality could be thought of in purely systemic terms. One could also define causality as an abstract property of a formal model, which may or may not have a correspondence with causal mechanisms, at any level of analysis, in the real world.

All this would make a difference regarding what could be considered as a proper cause – individual actions, holistic social systems, anything that could be abstracted as a variable – but does not change the fact that, whether within the model or by real mechanisms, and at whatever chosen level of analysis, a cause is by definition necessarily connected to its effect. Likewise, one could adopt a strict law-like conception of causation, so that any cause would in principle be explained under a general law,<sup>25</sup> or be more flexible and accept single-instance connections (social sciences have yet to produce any general law) as genuine causation. Either way, whether “A causes B” means that each and every event of type A would cause a B or that a token event A was observed causing B, the attribution of causation implies that B is, always or just in a specific case, necessitated by A.

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24. “This account of social causation depends upon something that Hume abhorred: the idea of necessity connecting cause to effect.”: Daniel Little, “Causal mechanisms in the social realm,” in *Causality in the Sciences* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 274. This goes well together with a strong form of methodological individualism, so that, “To explain behavior at the aggregate level, we must look at the behavior of the individual components.”: Elster, *Explaining Social Behavior*, 42.

25. “Causality connotes lawlike necessity ...”: Pearl, *Causality: Models, Reasoning and Inference*, 1. [This assumption would not seem to be required by the abstract formality of Pearl’s modeling, although it may be necessary to make sense of the author’s motivation and self-interpretation, considering that “the very essence of causation [is] the ability to predict the consequences of abnormal eventualities and new manipulations”: *Ibid.*, 415.]

That there is such a common implication of necessity through different accounts of causality is not surprising, as the idea of a necessary connection is integral to the concept itself of “cause”, before any specific conception of it. As Kant had it:

... this concept always requires that something *A* be of such a kind that something else *B* follows from it **necessarily** and **in accordance with an absolutely universal rule**. Appearances may well offer cases from which a rule is possible in accordance with which something usually happens, never a rule in accordance with which the succession is necessary; thus to the synthesis of cause and effect there attaches a dignity that can never be expressed empirically, namely, that the effect does not merely come along with the cause, but is posited **through** it and follows **from** it.<sup>26</sup>

Now, this passage expresses a rather strong view of causality, seemingly at odds with more recent conceptions. Many would take issue with the requirement of a “universal rule”, especially for the kind of single-occurrence connections often observed in social studies, and even with the necessity of the link between cause and effect. The first issue would be interesting, but does not concern us here, while the second is easily answered by noting that when contemporary philosophers or scientists challenge “necessity” as a characteristic of causation they are aiming at a different target from what was meant by Kant.

Nowadays, “cause” is often understood in a more analytic way as an INUS condition, meaning that a cause is “an *insufficient* but *necessary* part of a condition which is itself *unnecessary* but *sufficient* for the result”.<sup>27</sup> Such a formulation is expedient to make sense of the way in which we operationalize the concept, implicitly assuming a set of background conditions (which in principle could include the whole universe through all time) without which it would be impossible to

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26. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 223 [KrV, B124].

27. John L. Mackie, “Causes and Conditions,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (1965), 245.

meaningfully talk of causes and effects. Mackie uses the example of a short-circuit causing a fire: the fire would not have started without the short-circuit, but it would also not have started without other necessary condition (flammability, *etc.*) and could also have started without a short-circuit if something else had happened, such as a lighting bolt, *etc.*<sup>28</sup>

To go back to Kant, we may consider how the sun surely causes the stone to get warm,<sup>29</sup> but only provided that the stone is not in the shade, is not prevented from getting warm by cold water pouring over it, and so on and so forth, down to the existence of the sun and the rock and the laws of physics happening to work in a certain way. This, however, changes nothing about the connection between this more accurately defined cause and its necessarily following effect.<sup>30</sup> That is to say, if the short-circuit was a INUS cause of the fire, that means that in those conditions the fire necessarily followed from the short-circuit (although in different conditions it might have not, or it might also have come through without the short-circuit). Mackie himself individuates the necessity of causal connections in the objective world,<sup>31</sup> and in this sense his position is metaphysically more demanding than Kant's.

A second way of questioning the “necessity” of causation is through statistical, or probabilistic, conceptions, according to which we say that *x* causes *y* when *x* raises the probability of *y* hap-

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28. *Ibid.*, 245, 249-250.

29. Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science: With Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 53 [AA 4:302].

30. “The distinguishing feature of causal sequence is the conjunction of necessity-in-the-circumstances with causal priority”: Mackie, *The Cement of the Universe*, 51.

31. *Ibid.*, *Introduction*, ch. 8.

pening. We will discuss probability at length in the next section, but for the moment it is sufficient to note that this would take issue with the determinism implied by Kant's definition, not with the necessity of the connection between a cause and an effect that follows from it.<sup>32</sup> When expressing a causal statement probabilistically, in fact, what we are saying is that we are quantifiably uncertain (either for lack of information, or because the system we are describing is objectively indeterministic) as to whether the effect will follow the cause; but we are not saying that if the effect does in fact happen it was not necessarily linked to the cause, or else we would not be talking about a cause-effect relation.

For example, in saying that smoke causes cancer we are usually saying that smoke increases the probability of developing cancer, but when an actual instance of cancer happens it has to be necessarily connected to smoking (as an INUS condition, if you will) for us to meaningfully say that it was caused by it. Indeed, in such cases it would seem more precise to say either that what smoking causes is not cancer, but an increase of the probability of developing cancer (by which we would mean that it is necessary that the probability increased),<sup>33</sup> or that smoking sometimes causes cancer, and when it does that means that there is a necessary link between smoking and cancer, and sometimes not.

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32. The issue, thus, is whether causes have to be necessary and sufficient, not with whether the necessity of the cause-effect connection: "In advocating the notion of probabilistic causality, neither Suppes nor I intend to deny that there are sufficient causes [...] On our view, sufficient causes constitute a limiting case of probabilistic causes. On the sufficiency/necessity view, which we reject, this limiting case includes all *bona-fide* cause-effect relations." Wesley C. Salmon, *Scientific Explanation and the Causal Structure of the World* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 190.

33. Mackie, *The Cement of the Universe*, 49-50.

In other words, we could say that while philosophical and scientific conceptions of causation vary significantly, the necessary connection between cause and effect is part of the concept itself, and as such common to them all.<sup>34</sup> Similarly to the case of power and possibility, if one's understanding of "cause" did not include necessity, then it would not be an understanding of the concept of cause to begin with; we would just be using the same word to denote a different meaning. We can, to be sure, say that it is possible that A causes B, implying that it is also possible that A does not, in fact, cause B (interpreting that either as an expression of subjective uncertainty or objective indeterminism), but we cannot meaningfully say "A causes B, and that means that it is possible but not necessary that there is a connection between A and B".

Leaving aside probability, which we will examine shortly, it is plain that necessity is co-exclusive with possibility: if something is possible it cannot at once be necessary, and vice versa. And as we saw, we need the modality of possibility to make sense of power, and therefore if we see necessity, and necessity only, we are intrinsically unable to see any power.

This is more concretely comprehensible if we reflect on how any purely causal explanation makes it meaningless to attribute power to actors. If our account of a situation is entirely causal, then by hypothesis anyone's actions (if you can call them that) are caused, and thus no one can be said to have possibilities available. Within such a discourse, by accounting of causation in probabilistic or non-deterministic terms, it could be said that any one event is possible for someone or

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34. On concepts and conceptions see: *supra*, pp. ix-xiii.

something, but that would be like the possibility of an atom to decay, or a rock to fall from a precarious equilibrium, not like possibilities open before an actor.<sup>35</sup>

If any power in the proper sense enters within such an account, it is only through exogenous variables, or the “roots” in the causal graph,<sup>36</sup> which by definition are inputs in the explanatory account and not themselves explained by it.<sup>37</sup> A purely causal account may allow that the people involved perceive themselves as free and not entirely determined – it must, indeed, if it purports to be compatible with our perception of the world – but that would either be mere illusion or, if real, it would represent an unexplained exogenous variable.

From a first-person perspective, the mutual exclusion of necessity and possibility, therefore power, is all the more evident. It is sufficient to think how whenever it appears to us that our behavior is necessary, we will not experience the possibility of doing something, we will not have power. Our actions, as it were, would not be ours, but rather necessitated by external factors. Thus, as in the classical Marxist belittling of the “free” market of labor,<sup>38</sup> the disorganized proletariat is inherently less powerful than the capitalist, because while the latter has the possibility to

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35. Such a de-personalizing effect is evident in the cottage industry of explanations of voters’ behavior through ascriptive variables (race, gender, education, religion, *etc.*). Examples are countless, but see: Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2005); Andrew Gelman, *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State: Why Americans Vote the Way They Do* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

36. Pearl, *Causality: Models, Reasoning and Inference*, 1.2.1.

37. “The variables in *U* are called exogenous variables, meaning, roughly, that they are external to the model; we choose, for whatever reason, not to explain how they are caused.”: Judea Pearl, Madelyn Glymour, and Nicholas P.J. Jewell, *Causal Inference in Statistics: A Primer* (Chichester: Wiley, 2016), 27.

38. Friedrich Engels, “Competition,” in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (London, New York: Penguin, 2009).



bear the costs associated with labor bargain, the former needs to eat, or else they will die – the desire to avoid death usually being experienced as a strong causative factor.

Or, in a less dire situation, a scholar could not care about anything but thinking, discussing, and writing, what they believe to be true. Concretely, though, they also have to eat, not to mention the need for the tools of the trade, access to scholarly resources, *etc.* All these necessities require one to get a job at an academic institution and, therefore, one cannot do, think, and write whatever they want, but they must conform to certain social and academic norms, behave, write, talk, think, within certain boundaries, however broad, which limit their power to study and research whatever they want however they see fit.

*Mutatis mutandis*, the same is true for any occupation, from store clerk to politician, or indeed any conceivable social role – including those that must not worry about money and mere survival, which historically have tended to enforce the strictest behavioral rules. All necessities of this kind can be described in causal terms, so that the cause of the scholar writing as they do is that they needed a job, and they needed publications to obtain it, and they needed to present certain arguments in a certain way in order to get published, *etc.* Likewise for the causes of the comparatively weak bargain position of the worker, the limited choices available to the politician, and so on and so forth. Any power we might have is always in-between all these necessitating causes, in the space they leave open and which they so define.<sup>39</sup>

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39. In a different terminology, this would be the space of appearances, which is at once partly defined by objective factors but is also where we can interrupt necessary processes by initiating new causal chains through our actions: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 177, 246-247; Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Thinking, 213-214, Willing, 29-31.

Incidentally, given the broader definitions of causation that may be employed, one could take a metaphysical stand in favor of free will, and still present a purely causal account of social phenomena that would take no cognizance power. All it takes is to consider free will as a primitive cause (an unexplained exogenous variable), consistently with its traditional understanding, thus taking individuals as the basic units of the causal account in harmony with modern methodological individualism.

This observation may also help to understand the difference between the enquiry about power we are conducting here and the debates concerning free will and determinism.<sup>40</sup> Far from being an alternative to causality, the assumption of free will is just a starting point for causal accounts. This is consistent with the way in which, historically, the concept of the will was constructed by Augustine, as a means to attribute responsibility for evil to mankind while saving the dogma that all power (which was of course *potentia*, not our power/*pouvoir/Macht*) came from God.<sup>41</sup> The etiological proximity of causality to the attribution of responsibility is obvious, and abundantly remarked upon.<sup>42</sup>

Besides metaphysical positions, the point is that any factor (variable) not determined by a cause within the model/theory would by definition be external, exogenous, unexplained, because by stipulation the only relevant explanations are causal ones. Conversely, all the connections be-

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40. The contemporary philosophical framework has largely been set by: Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

41. Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*; Augustine, *The City of God*, Book V.

42. E.g. Hans Kelsen, "Causality and Retribution," *Philosophy of Science* 8, no. 4 (1941); Hans Kelsen, "Causality and Imputation," *Ethics* 61, no. 1 (1950); Pearl, *Causality: Models, Reasoning and Inference*, epilogue.

tween the variables would be causal connections.<sup>43</sup> From the perspective of any one such model, exogenous variables could “freely” assume any value, and as such be the only points where the category of possibility could apply; but again, by definition, that would be beyond the model’s explanatory power. Tellingly, in jargon the value of exogenous variables is often said to be “assigned by nature”, as if to further exorcise any power-related language.

Of course, this is not literally the goal pursued, since an explicit aim of causal modeling is to be useful to those having the power to implement, or not, certain measures.<sup>44</sup> Causal models are useful to clarify which interventions are likely to bring forth which results, and thus may (if correct) be a tool at the disposal of powerful actors. This, however, does not break the analogy with the natural sciences’ method; it rather strengthens it, since the role of the external actor (policy-maker) who may have the power to assign values to certain variables is thus modeled onto that of the experimental scientist, who acts to set the values “nature” will assume for any particular experiment.

There are two observations to be made here. First, if the meaning of the scientific model in its policy-oriented use is to determine the better means to achieve an end (which itself is set from

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43. “... three basic patterns of causal relationships that would be observed for any three variables that are connected to each other by only two directed edges: a chain of mediation, a fork of mutual dependence, and an inverted fork of mutual causation.”: Morgan, and Winship, *Counterfactuals and Causal Inference*, 81-82.

44. “The ultimate aim of many statistical studies is to predict the effects of interventions. When we collect data on factors associated with wild fires in the west, we are actually searching for something we can intervene upon in order to decrease wild fire frequency. When we perform a study on a new cancer drug, we are trying to identify how a patient’s illness responds when we intervene upon it by medicating the patient. When we research the correlation between violent television and acts of aggression in children, we are trying to determine whether intervening to reduce children’s access to violent television will reduce their aggressiveness.”: Pearl, Glymour, and Jewell, *Causal Inference in Statistics: A Primer*, 53. For a defense of the “manipulationist or interventionist” account of causation see: James Woodward, *Making Things Happen: A Theory of Causal Explanation* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

without), it follows that even the power of the policy-maker is outside the purveyance of the causal theory. From the point of view of the model, in fact, ends are immaterial – moreover, any causal determination is reversible, meaning that if the political scientist can confidently say to the policy-maker that they will get  $x$  by doing  $y$ , the policy-maker will at once learn that, *ceteris paribus*, the opposite result  $\neg x$  can be achieved by not doing  $y$  – while the choice of the means is fully determined,<sup>45</sup> and as such no longer within the power of the policy-maker (again, from the model's perspective). The same reasoning shows how the application of game-theory to political studies, while not always couched in causal terms, is equally committed to necessity rather than possibility. Game-theory, in fact, aims to mathematically determine the best strategy, which (assuming a correct description of the “game”) the player wanting to achieve their objectives necessarily has to follow, thus having no real choice at all.<sup>46</sup>

Second, even if we gave causal models a pass regarding the power of the external actor who sets the exogenous variables, that would still be the only power being considered; to the exclusion of the powers of every other involved person, whose reactions would by stipulation be reduced to effects of causes external to them. This is troubling not just from a normative perspective – as it presupposes a categorical separation of policy-makers from subjects, which appears incompatible with democratic principles still cherished, at least nominally, by most political scientists – but also

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45. Even when expressed probabilistically, the point is to know what would necessarily be the best course of action, given the uncertainties.

46. If the game does not have a “pure equilibrium” the optimal choice is a “mixed strategy”. Randomness, not possibility or power, becomes then the governing concept. “A mixed strategy, denoted by  $\sigma_i$ , is a randomization over a combination of pure strategies.”: Nolan McCarty, and Adam Meirowitz, *Political Game Theory: An Introduction* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 108.

for the possibility of conceiving of power as such. In fact, the capacity to represent possibilities presupposes a complex enough language, which itself practically presupposes the presence of a plurality of other people to whom words can be addressed to as to persons (as opposed to be causative factors, as in a purely perlocutory use of language).

For the moment we will leave this point hanging;<sup>47</sup> we shall return upon the connection between conceiving possibilities and language in the last chapter. What is to be kept present is that, while the argument is still normative in a sense – any linguistic definition has the logical form of a norm – it is not normative in the sense of being based on any value or goal to be achieved. The problem here is not that a technically oriented political science is “bad” in any moral or political sense, but rather that if such a technical orientation is exclusive, then the discipline is bound to lose sight of power, and thus of its own domain of applicability.

The methodological obliviousness to power does not mean that such a science would be useless or could not have its own validity as a truth-seeking endeavor, only that it could not be “political”. It may be useful to think in formalized causal terms, and we cannot foreclose the possibility that this would allow an accurate description of social reality as it truly is. Nevertheless, a causal approach cannot pretend to be comprehensive, unless one is committed to the position that power does not exist, or anyway does not matter. That might be true in some ontological sense, al-

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47. But see *supra*, 74-79.

though at the moment we do not possess a language in which such a truth could be understood,<sup>48</sup> but most assuredly would be a strange stance to take for a science claiming to be about politics.

The conclusion here reached – that the obliviousness of power within political science is not merely contingent, but rather consistent with the discipline's methodological assumptions – rest on four main premises:

1. the meaning of power is based on the modality of possibility
2. necessity is different from, and indeed opposite to, possibility
3. political science is conducted in causal terms
4. causation imply the modality of necessity

While all these premises have been discussed here and in previous chapters, there remain an issue with the last one, the necessary connection of causality with the modality of necessity. The elephant in the room is the concept of probability. Probability is the only idea that could compete with causality for ubiquity within contemporary political science. The two do not overlap perfectly – since probability is used by quantitative approaches even when they are not intent in establishing causality (remember the bipartition between descriptive and causal inferences), whereas qualitative works may claim to establish causal connections without employing a probabilistic ap-

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48. This is not in contradiction with the position that scientific-causal languages do not contemplate power. Such languages are parasitic upon natural languages, without which the practice of scientists, indeed their existence as thinking beings, would not be possible.

paratus<sup>49</sup> – and yet it is the case that the dominant views of causality are nowadays expressed in probabilistic language.<sup>50</sup>

“Probability” may seem to cover the same conceptual space as “possibility”, and it is in fact often discussed in opposition to necessity (though we have already briefly noted how this has more to do with determinism than with necessity *qua talis*). Thus, in the next section we will have to examine why such appearance is fallacious and how, in its practical-scientific use, probability is connected to necessity, not possibility. This will not only dispel a possible objection to the thesis that political science adopts the mode of necessity to understand its object but also, by contrast, enhance our comprehension of possibility and, therefore, of power.

### 3.2. Probabilities and possibilities

As we saw in the previous chapter, the meaning of power hinges on the category, or modality, of possibility. “Possibility” is for us a primitive concept, not further defined in positive terms. Nevertheless, we may gain in understanding by exploring the difference with other concepts. As we saw, the relevant antonym is “necessity” – and here we should note how the semantic opposite of “possible”, that is “impossible”, simply means the necessity of a negative: if something is impossible,

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49. Brady, and Collier, *Rethinking Social Inquiry*, Part II.E. Qualitative Tools for Causal Inference (chs. 10-12).

50. Patrick Suppes, *A probabilistic theory of causality* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1970); Nancy Cartwright, *Nature's Capacities and Their Measurement* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Ellery Eells, *Probabilistic Causality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Jon Williamson, “Probabilistic Theories,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Causation*, ed. Helen Beebe, Christopher Hitchcock, and Peter Menzies (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

then it necessarily is not. Thus, concepts derived from necessity will have meanings in various ways opposite to power.

Two of such derived concepts, which are closer to each other than usually recognized, are especially relevant for us, characterizing the forgetfulness of power of both contemporary political science and political philosophy: probability and potentiality (*potentia*, as we saw). Here we will examine the concept of probability, how it is connected to the modality of necessity, and how that contributes to the removal of power from the focus of contemporary approaches to politics.

At a first glance, the ideas of probability and possibility seems very similar. In a sense, probability is nothing but a way to turn the tripartite distinction of impossible ( $P=0$ ), possible ( $0 < P < 1$ ), and necessary ( $P=1$ ) into a continuously numbered, arbitrarily divisible, space. In practice, we are interested in assessing probabilities within the space of the possible, as the limit values of the impossible and the necessary are trivial, and thus the domain of the meaningful applicability of probabilistic calculations in a sense coincides with that of possibility. Despite referring to the same domain, however, probability and possibility are differently employed, resulting in two co-domains, so to speak, with little overlap and opposite practical implications.

In order to better see this, we shall begin with a closer look at the concept of probability (§3.2.1), before moving to its philosophical interpretations, or conceptions (§3.2.2).



### 3.2.1. Defining probability

Pinning down what social scientists mean by “probability” is not as immediate as the ubiquity of the concept might lead to suppose. This is partly due to the fact that probability is a mathematical concept: however problematic its application, the definition may be left to mathematicians, and the problems to epistemologists. The contention between Bayesian and frequentist interpretations of probabilities contributes to murk the waters, particularly since many seem to adopt a mix, not always well clarified, of the two.<sup>51</sup> To the paucity of definitions “internal” to political and social sciences we cannot but respond by taking as a “standard” the mathematical formalization of probability, insofar as it is intelligible to non-mathematicians. Concerning the coexistence of conflicting epistemological paradigms, instead, in the next section we shall observe how all of them, regardless of which (if any) is correct, imply a reduction of possibilities to necessity.

Luckily, as it happens with mathematics, the interface with natural language is mostly confined to axiomatic definitions, which may be complex but, provided one accepts the mathematician’s word for the proof of the consequences, do not require an advanced mathematical training to be understood.<sup>52</sup> This basic level may appear inconsequential to political scientists, but that is where meanings are formally defined – often to be forgotten while being left implicit in empirical appli-

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51. Bayesian probability is increasingly seen as the better paradigm by mathematicians and statisticians, but the training of political and social scientists may lag somewhat behind. Additionally, in most common uses, there is either no difference or the frequentist version of the math is more expedient: Will H. Moore, and David A. Siegel, *A Mathematics Course for Political and Social Research* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 175-77.

52. This is different from the case of causality we just examined, for probability is mathematically defined and causality is not – in fact, attempted formalizations of causality do rely on probability, but they do still imply an undefined categorial meaning proper to causality.

cations. The cornerstone of the modern theory of probabilities is the treatise from Andrey N. Kolmogorov,<sup>53</sup> *Grundbegriffe der Wahrscheinlichkeitsrechnung*,<sup>54</sup> first published in 1933. Kolmogorov's description of the axioms is as follows:

Let  $E$  be a collection of elements  $e, h, z$ , which we shall call *elementary events*, and  $\mathfrak{F}$  a set of subsets of  $E$ ; the elements of the set  $\mathfrak{F}$  will be called random events.

I.  $\mathfrak{F}$  is a field of sets.

II.  $\mathfrak{F}$  contains the set  $E$ .

III. To each set  $A$  in  $\mathfrak{F}$  is assigned a non-negative real number  $P(A)$ . This number  $P(A)$  is called the probability of the event  $A$ .

IV.  $P(E)$  equals 1.

V. If  $A$  and  $B$  have no element in common, then

$$P(A+B) = P(A) + P(B)$$

A system of sets,  $\mathfrak{F}$ , together with a definite assignment of numbers  $P(A)$ , satisfying Axioms I-V, is called a *field of probability*.<sup>55</sup>

While the extension to infinite sets requires a sixth axiom:<sup>56</sup>

VI. For a decreasing sequence of events

$$A_1 \supset A_2 \supset \dots \supset A_n \supset \dots$$

of  $\mathfrak{F}$ , for which

$$\bigcap_n A_n = \emptyset,$$

the following equation holds:

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53. Different (Bayesian) axiomatizations of probability theory do exist: Richard T. Cox, "Probability, Frequency and Reasonable Expectation," *American Journal of Physics* 14, no. 1 (1946); George Polya, *Mathematics and Plausible Reasoning* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954). Here we are only examining Kolmogorov's theory, partly because it is more widespread and partly because the differences are more interpretive than mathematical – the claim being that Kolmogorov's theory is subsumed as a limited case of the more general Bayesian formalization: Edwin T. Jaynes, *Probability Theory: The Logic of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Appendix A.

54. Andrey N. Kolmogorov, *Foundations of the theory of probability* (New York: Chelsea, 1956).

55. *Ibid.*, 2.

56. Nowadays, the theory is more economically described by three axioms, e.g.: Allan Gut, *Probability: A Graduate Course* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 10. Kolmogorov's original exposition is here useful, for in its being more verbose it better reveals the interface between mathematics and natural language.

$$\lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} P(A_n) = 0 \quad 57$$

In natural language: we are considering a set  $E$  of elementary events (sample space), and a collection  $\mathfrak{F}$  of measurable subsets of  $E$ .  $\mathfrak{F}$  is a collection of subsets in the sense that it includes the combinations (including single elements as well as the empty set) of the elementary events in the set  $E$  – thus, for example, the coin coming out “head” is one event, and so is “tail”, but “either tail or head” is also an event, to which we can assign a probability of 1.<sup>58</sup> That a set is measurable means that there is a function assigning a real number to any of its subsets, respecting certain properties, intuitively typical of size measures, such as that the measure of a larger subset should correspond to the sum of the measures of its disjoint subsets, *etc.* A non-measurable subset would be one to which no “size” could be assigned which, while the mathematics is quite complex,<sup>59</sup> we can intuitively understand would not cohere with the concept of probability, as it would create paradoxes in which the “sizes” of two sets, thus their probabilities, would be not comparable.  $P(E)$  is the measure of probability, that is to say a number, assigned to any subset of  $E$  which is part of

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57. Kolmogorov, *Foundations of the theory of probability*, 14.

58. A less confusing terminology might label elementary events “outcomes” while reserving “events” for the combination of outcomes in the subsets in  $F$  (including sets with just one element, a single outcome, of course): Moore, and Siegel, *A Mathematics Course for Political and Social Research*, 177.

59. The existence of non-measurable sets is one of the counter-intuitive mathematical facts following from the axiom of choice, which is however accepted by most mathematicians and necessary to prove other results which do have a clearer applicability. Non-measurable sets were first described in: Giuseppe Vitali, *Sul problema della misura dei gruppi di punti di una retta* (Bologna: Gamberini e Parmeggiani, 1905). A famous example is the Banach–Tarski paradox, stating that a tridimensional ball can be divided into pieces (subsets) so that the pieces can be re-arranged into two balls identical to the first (or indeed any number of balls of any size), violating the conservation of volume: Stefan Banach, and Alfred Tarski, “Sur la décomposition des ensembles de points en parties respectivement congruentes,” *Fundamenta Mathematicae* 6 (1924); Grzegorz Tomkowicz, and Stan Wagon, *The Banach-Tarski Paradox* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). While the feat is of course impossible to perform on a actual ball, we should note that when assigning probabilities we are not dealing with material objects obeying physical constraints.

the collection  $\mathfrak{F}$  and which has to satisfy the following conditions: for any event the probability is greater or equal to zero; the probability that any event at all happens (that is to say, the sum of the probabilities of all elementary events, in  $E$ ) is equal to 1 (certainty); and the probability of the union of any number of non-overlapping events (subsets) in  $\mathfrak{F}$  is equal to the sum of the probability of each one of them.

Or, more concisely:

Expressed in technical jargon, probability is a normalized denumerably additive measure defined over a  $\sigma$ -algebra of subsets of an abstract space. Something is lost with this answer, however. For if the space is finite, the answer also shrinks down to saying: Probabilities are numbers between 0 and 1 such that if two events cannot occur simultaneously, the probability of either one of them occurring is the sum of the probability of the first and the probability of the second.<sup>60</sup>

Something is indeed lost in the compact definition, namely the evidence of a connection with the more practical and intuitive uses of probability. Such connection was clearer in Kolmogorov's original formulation, and especially in his comment to the sixth axiom:

For infinite fields, on the other hand, the Axiom of Continuity, VI, proved to be independent of Axioms I - V. Since the new axiom is essential for infinite fields of probability only, it is almost impossible to elucidate its empirical meaning, as has been done, for example, in the case of Axioms I - V in § 2 of the first chapter. For, in describing any observable random process we can obtain only finite fields of probability. Infinite fields of probability occur only as idealized models of real random processes. *We limit ourselves, arbitrarily, to only those models which satisfy Axiom VI.* This limitation has been found expedient in researches of the most diverse sort.<sup>61</sup>

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60. Jan Von Plato, *Creating Modern Probability. Its Mathematics, Physics and Philosophy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1.

61. Kolmogorov, *Foundations of the theory of probability*, 15.

Now, Kolmogorov's reservations about the applicability of infinite fields of probability was partly due to his frequentist interpretation, which understands probabilities as the limit of frequencies over infinite repetitions. If the events were infinite, there could be no convergence of frequencies, and thus no probability according to frequentism. Under different interpretations of probability, that might not be a problem, and infinite fields  $\mathfrak{F}$  would be conceivable.<sup>62</sup> In practice, infinite fields of probability are not commonly encountered in political science. In most cases, the sample space is a finite set as well, but infinite sample spaces are possible; that, however, is not as relevant, since a finite field can be constructed by considering disjoint subsets. Thus, for example, the sample space "possible heights of human beings" is uncountably infinite (in-between any two heights there can always be third one) and in practice not determinable (we cannot measure every human being who ever lived, let alone with perfect accuracy), but any empirical enquiry would work by establishing a finite set of thresholds, to which probabilities could be easily attributed.

We may now see what makes probability conceptually distinct from possibility. The first difference is that, while possibility is an "on-off" concept – something is either possible or it is not, the latter meaning that the thing or event in question either necessarily is, or necessarily is not – probability is defined numerically over a countable space. This is trivial, as it is the condition for the mathematical application of probability to make sense in the first place, but it must be adequately emphasized, since it shows how only one of our two concepts is pliable to scientific use.

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62. Donald A. Gillies, *Philosophical Theories of Probability* (London: Routledge, 2000), 66-69. It is also possible that the consideration of infinite sets would be limited from a Bayesian perspective: Jaynes, *Probability Theory: The Logic of Science*, xxii.

Saying that something is just possible, from a quantitative-empirical perspective, equals a surrender to the inability to assign a number to the given case.

The second difference is that probability presupposes a bounded space of possible outcomes. There may be uncertainties, and in practice the space may be too vast and complex to be successfully analyzed but, by construction, there has to be a space of all outcomes, whose total probability is 1, which is to say, necessity. In contrast, “possibility” does not imply anything concerning the boundaries, or lack thereof, of possible outcomes. We may employ the concept of possibility in relation to a bounded and completely known space of outcomes, so we may say that it is possible that the coin will come up head. We may use the concept in relation to a space which is bounded but not countable, so we may say that it is possible that a policy will be enacted, even though it may be impossible to identify all the possible policies.<sup>63</sup> We may also employ “possibility” without assuming any boundary, either by attributing omnipotence (nothing is impossible for God), or by leaving the issue temporarily unspecified, as we most often do when deliberating, from a first person perspective, about courses of action with no a priori constraints.

This second point shows how probability, as employed by political and social scientists, is conceptually narrower than possibility, in that it does not encompass infinite sets. In principle, though, probabilities can be applied to infinite sample spaces ( $WE$ ) and even infinite probability fields ( $\mathfrak{F}$ ). This has not been proven useful to describe social phenomena, and it is unlikely ever to

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63. Though we can still say that certain options are outside of the realm of possibility, which may lead to generalizations such as the famous: “politics is the art of the possible”: Otto Von Bismarck, *Neue Tischgespräche und Interviews* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1895), 245.

be,<sup>64</sup> but as a matter of fact it helps to uncover a third and deeper dis-analogy between probability and possibility. When probability is applied over infinite sets of events, in fact, the requisite of the measurability of the subsets becomes non-trivial. Let us recall that a subset being measurable means that a “size” can be assigned to it, behaving as we would intuitively expect in its comparison with the “sizes” of other subsets.<sup>65</sup> This is the condition imposed by the last axiom of probability theory, as we saw.

Possibilities, however, do not behave like a measurable set. We may subdivide and redefine possibilities at arbitrary levels of detail and, crucially, across different contexts which need not be comparable. Indeed, if observed in sufficient detail, any such comparison happens through different language-games – for the “rules” of what matters as a possibility will change with our different interests and perspectives – and that is the same as saying that we cannot measure and compare possibilities in the same way as we do with probabilities. Any comparison between possibilities would require contextual assumptions and hermeneutical means incompatible with mathematical formalization.

For example, we may assign a probability to some community organizer becoming President, but what does it mean to have the possibility of being president? It certainly would not mean the same thing for every community organizer nor for every observer; and if it does not mean the same thing, it would not be properly described as the same event. Being President is semantically

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64. This is not only because the mathematics gets complex quite fast, but also because infinite sets can be compactly described in terms of generative functions, whereas semantic descriptions of social events cannot be derived through mathematical formulas, and therefore constructing a set of infinite (relevant) social events is impossible.

65. *Supra*, p. 139, fn. 59.

richer than just winning an election, since what one does and what kind of President one is matters greatly for the candidate as well as for everyone else. How such possibilities are represented, and evaluated, will vary with the perspective of each person, and also across time, as more and more relevant events happen.

At any given moment we may surely take a step back, so to speak, choose a definite set of relevant possibilities and assign probabilities to those – we have to, if we want to use probabilities at all. So we can construct probabilities for winning the election, enacting a given policy, being re-elected, appointing a majority of Supreme Court judges, achieving peace and prosperity, and so on for any set of events related to the overall meaning of “being President” (with the usual problems in assessing speculations about the future). But no matter how deep into such analyses we will go,<sup>66</sup> we would only be able to capture a definite set of events which cannot exhaust the space of the possible, both because objectively there will be infinitely more possibilities, and because what constitutes a relevant possibility to begin with will vary with our different interests and perspectives, and through time as well.

Now, one could object that the same is true not just for the mathematics of probability, but for any description carried out in any language, including natural ones. And that would be correct, for any representation of possibilities will have to be finite, and as such liable to be further refined and subdivided. This, however, is not truly a counter-argument but rather another way of stating

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66. Is it relevant to the meaning of “being President” whether one wears a flag-pin or not? For some, it is paramount: Cruz, Gilbert, “A Brief History of the Flag Lapel Pin.” *Time*, July 3 2008; Keefe, Josh, “An Updated History of Lapel Pin Politics.” *Observer*, July 7 2016.



our thesis. The difference, in fact, is that the grammar of possibility works perfectly well in that way, for the concept, unlike probability, does not imply a collection of measurable subsets of events which together amount to certainty or necessity ( $p=1$ ). The language of probability, instead, is shattered whenever the construction of the set of relevant events is questioned.

To be sure, any local meta-discussion about the construction of the set can in principle be settled, at least provisionally; but such meta-discussion, which would properly be about possibilities, has to be conducted in a broader natural language, outside the boundaries of probability theory. More concretely, this is what happens whenever a political scientist's choice of the relevant variables and outcomes is questioned, and then they have to provide reasons in response. This argumentative work cannot be carried out in mathematical language, for it needs to provide contextual, narrative, hermeneutic reasons, relevant to construct the specialized semantics which is then employed to conduct the scientific work.

We may also observe that, for any given reduction of possibility to a definite probability space, it is always possible to add one more event, either by considering further possible events or by dividing extant ones through a finer grained semantics. Possibilities in this sense behave like an uncountable set,<sup>67</sup> whose subsets are not measurable and thus not pliable to probabilistic analysis. Logically, this is enough to prove that probabilities cannot exhaust the space of the possible. The measurability, and therefore the comparability, which is what makes probabilities useful, are con-

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67. *Supra*, p. 139.

structured by slicing well defined events out of a space of possibility which, being bound to the perspective of each actor at a given time, is indefinite and ever-changing.

Thus, even though we are interested in assessing probabilities only for events which are possible, by design probability cannot cover the entirety of the possible, either intensionally or extensionally. The formal properties, axiomatically defined, that makes probability useful for scientific enquiries are the same features differentiating it from the category of possibility, which is both broader and qualitatively different.

### 3.2.2. Interpreting probability

Up to this point, we have assessed the implications of the technical definition of probability. However, the meaning of a mathematical theory with regard to the world, if there is any, depends on how it is interpreted. In the case at hand, such interpretations, diverse as they are, further distance probability from possibility, ultimately making the former into a tool to reduce the latter to a framework of necessity.

We should first spend some words on the ordinary language meaning of “probability”. According to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*: “the extent to which something is probable; the likelihood of something happening or being the case.” “Probable” comes from the latin *probare* (testing, obtaining/providing proofs) and it originally meant “worthy of belief”, that is to say worthy of belief because it can be proved. The ordinary meaning of probability appears close to the mathematical definition, again according to the dictionary: “the extent to which an event is likely to occur, measured by the ratio of the favorable cases to the whole number of cases possible”; which

differs from the general definition merely by the explicit mention of a numerical ratio. On the other hand, the older meaning of the term, emphasizing belief, related to information which could be proved, seems closer to an informal version of Bayesianism, according to which the uncertainty is attributed to us and our imperfect knowledge.

Either way, the origin of the term has nothing to do with possibility, except in the sense of the possibility of proving something. The ordinary meaning of probability, as it were, may be seen as a relaxation of the requisite of proof, so that now we don't need to prove with certainty, but just with some likelihood. This is in accord with contemporary views of probability theory as a subset of inductive logic.<sup>68</sup>

From a social science's perspective, the most relevant interpretations of probabilities are the frequentist and the Bayesian ones. The former, seeing probabilities as limit frequencies of events over infinite repetitions, was the standard one until a few decades ago; the latter, based on the idea of degrees of belief, has its roots in the XVIII century,<sup>69</sup> was relatively marginalized for a long time, but is now most widely accepted. Interpretations of probability, however, may be categorized in more articulated ways. For example, Donald Gillies presents four main alternatives:

1. The *logical* theory identifies probability with degree of rational belief. It is assumed that given the same evidence, all rational human beings will entertain the same degree of belief in a hy-

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68. John Earman, *Bayes or Bust?: A Critical Examination of Bayesian Confirmation Theory* (1992); Ian Hacking, *An Introduction to Probability and Inductive Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Jaynes, *Probability Theory: The Logic of Science*; Patrick Maher, "Explication of Inductive Probability," *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 39, no. 6 (2010).

69. Taking its name from Thomas Bayes (1701-1761), an English philosopher and proto-statistician who formulated the theorem to calculate conditional probabilities: Thomas Bayes, "An Essay towards Solving a Problem in the Doctrine of Chances," *Philosophical Transactions* 53 (1763).

pothesis or prediction.

2. The *subjective* theory identifies probability with the degree of belief of a particular individual. Here it is no longer assumed that all rational human beings with the same evidence will have the same degree of belief in a hypothesis or prediction. Differences of opinion are allowed.
3. The *frequency* theory defines the probability of an outcome as the limiting frequency with which that outcome appears in a long series of similar events.
4. The *propensity* theory, or at least one of its versions, takes probability to be a propensity inherent in a set of repeatable conditions. To say that the probability of a particular outcome is  $p$  is to claim that the repeatable conditions have a propensity such that, if they were to be repeated a large number of times, they would produce a frequency of the outcome close to  $p$ .<sup>70</sup>

To these, a description of the “classical theory” and Gillies’ own proposal of an “intersubjective” interpretation are then added, bringing the total to six. Only three, however, are deemed viable (or non-superseded), the subjective, intersubjective and the propensity interpretations,<sup>71</sup> with the author opting for a pluralist view according to which different interpretations are appropriate in different contexts.<sup>72</sup> David Mellor, following a slightly different logic, proposes another tripartite distinction between physical probabilities (chance), epistemic probability, and subjective probabilities (credences).<sup>73</sup> A similar partition is also employed by Alan Hájek, who distinguishes between a “quasi-logical concept”, further divided between “*classical* and *logical* probability”, “the

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70. Gillies, *Philosophical Theories of Probability*, 1.

71. *Ibid.*, 184.

72. *Ibid.*, ch. 9.

73. David H. Mellor, *Probability: A Philosophical Introduction* (2005), 8-9.

concept of an agent's degree of confidence" (subjective, Bayesian), and "an objective concept", which can be further analyzed through "*frequentist, propensity, and best-system* interpretations".<sup>74</sup>

The details of interpretations and sub-interpretations are not crucial for understanding the use of probability by political studies; we will thus stick with a general tripartition not unlike Hájek's, distinguishing between logical/classical, subjective/Bayesian, and objective/physical interpretations.<sup>75</sup> I myself am quite convinced by Gillies' pluralism, meaning that different interpretations may make more sense in different contexts,<sup>76</sup> though I disagree with his contention that the objective view is most fundamental.<sup>77</sup> In any case, here we are about to see how all these alternative interpretations effectively transform possibilities into necessity.

By a logical interpretation of probability here I mean any view according to which probabilities are neither physical properties nor dependent on anyone's beliefs, but rather determined by the logical structure of available options, or possible outcomes. This is more restrictive than Gillies' definition quoted above, and also different from the idea that a theory of probability can be understood as a formalization of inductive logic. The simplest example of logical probability is the

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74. Alan Hájek, "Interpretations of Probability." (2011): <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/probability-interpret/>.

75. This also corresponds, at least verbally to Popper's partition between logical, subjective, and objective probabilities; he, however, defined the logical interpretation in a more restrictive way, deeming it a sub-category of the subjective interpretation: Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), 47-48.

76. A pluralist interpretation of probability was also proposed by: Rudolf Carnap, "The Two Concepts of Probability: The Problem of Probability," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 5, no. 4 (1945).

77. Gillies, *Philosophical Theories of Probability*, 185-86. See also his earlier view (originally published in 1973) in: Donald A. Gillies, *An Objective Theory of Probability* (2012). It seems to me that some form of Bayesianism has to be the more general understanding. While we can and do have beliefs about frequencies, propensities, and logical spaces, and we can revise such beliefs in view of the relevant kinds of evidence, we cannot "have" frequencies etc. "about" our beliefs. Thus a Bayesian interpretation, broadly understood, can subsume the others, while the reciprocal seems impossible.

so-called classical theory, whose domain of application were games of chance. In such games (leaving aside that no die is perfectly balanced, *etc.*) outcomes are determined by the rules, not by physical factors, nor by subjective beliefs. When the space of outcomes is not determined by stipulated rules, the applicability of logical probabilities would seem doubtful and indeed, while notable attempts have been made to extend it as a general theory of probability,<sup>78</sup> the idea survives mainly as a set of heuristic tools, such as the “principle of indifference”,<sup>79</sup> to fill the gaps left by insufficient empirical informations.<sup>80</sup>

In terms of political and social science applications this may be the relatively least relevant interpretation of probability, but game-theoretic analyses rely, at least partly, on some version of it. Once the rules of the game and the payoffs functions for the players have been modeled, in fact, the choice of the correct move follows logically without further contact with empirical data (which may however be used to confirm or refute the appropriateness of the model).<sup>81</sup>

When employed in relation to a well-defined game, logical probabilities do indeed exhaust the space of relevant possibilities. The space defined by the game rules, however, is not the entire space of the possible, which is thus left un-analyzed but, in a sense, also un-threatened. On the other hand, when used as an heuristic device to provisionally fill-in for missing data, logical prob-

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78. John M. Keynes, *A treatise on probability* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1921); Rudolf Carnap, *Logical Foundations of Probability* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1950).

79. Keynes, *A treatise on probability*, ch. 4.

80. Gillies, *Philosophical Theories of Probability*, 47-49.

81. Such an approach works all the better the more the game's rule are institutionally specified, rather than being made up by the scientist interpreting unregulated social dynamics, *e.g.*: Charles M. Cameron, *Veto Bargaining: Presidents and the Politics of Negative Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

ability does not differ significantly from a subjective belief, if not for the fact that by applying ready-made rules to determine presumptive probabilities it limits the choice of one's own "priors".<sup>82</sup> When deployed within a game-like context from a player's perspective, the effect of logical probabilities is to collapse the space of the possible into a strategy which is necessarily the best, similarly to what observed regarding causal models.<sup>83</sup>

One could note that the power of the player would reside in the possibility of determining the values (payoffs) assigned to the outcomes; and that would be true, but such possibility, generalized, makes it impossible to reduce the situation to a model and assigning probabilities, for if no utility function were fixed, there would be nothing to calculate upon. Another way to make sense of power within a game-theoretic model would be to allow for the possibility of changing the game's rules, which clearly is relevant to politics, but again beyond the boundaries of calculability.<sup>84</sup>

The other two interpretations, with their sub-types, are more commonly held to this day. By subjective/Bayesian probability here I mean any view according to which probabilities measure degrees of belief. Such probabilities are subjective in the sense that a belief exists only and insofar as it is held by someone: the label thus covers all types of Bayesian interpretations, including those

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82. Logical probabilities may be considered a subset of Bayesianism: Gillies, *Philosophical Theories of Probability*, chs. 3-4.

83. *Supra*, p. 132. For the application of probabilistic calculus to game theory: McCarty, and Meirowitz, *Political Game Theory: An Introduction*, chs. 3, 6. Rational choice and game-theoretic models are often interpreted as causal-explanatory for political behavior, and the formal analogy between causal models and game-theory is evident.

84. One may devise a formalized model for changing the internal rules of a parliament; but then the rules of *this* rule-changing game would have to be fixed, or else again there would be no game to calculate upon.

that impose constraints on the assignment of prior probabilities.<sup>85</sup> To understand the contrast with possibility, in fact, it suffices to take into account the idea of probability as a degree of belief, regardless of the way to determine such degree. Under this interpretation, probabilities properly refer to propositions which may be considered more or less credible.<sup>86</sup> Such propositions can be of any kind, from logical-mathematical to empirical: I may glance at a formula, without checking the details, and say that I believe there is a high probability that it is correct, or I may say that there is a 60% chance of rain, *etc.*

There are here two relevant cases: either the conditions making the proposition true or false are deterministic, or they are not. In the first case, the uncertainty in our belief would be due to lack of information, imperfection of cognitive capacities *etc.* If perfect knowledge were achievable, probability would disappear into certainty. This was, famously, Laplace's view.<sup>87</sup> In the second case, the uncertainty would either correspond to certain knowledge about the inherent indeterministic nature of whatever we were talking about, or be a compound of such indeterministic nature and the imperfection of our knowledge. In the first case – uncertainty is in our belief, not in the phenomenon – we are basically interpreting probability according to its original meaning, as the capacity to prove/being proven. As we noted, this has nothing to do with possibility, except

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85. Individuating eleven relevant “facets”, Irving J. Good calculated 46656 possible varieties of Bayesianism: Irving J. Good, *Good Thinking: The Foundations of Probability and Its Applications* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), ch. 3. More parsimoniously, Williamson employs a division between “subjective” and “objective” Bayesianism: Jon Williamson, *Bayesian Nets and Causality: Philosophical and Computational Foundations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 11-12, ch. 5. Either way, all varieties are covered by the broad definition here adopted.

86. Jaynes, *Probability Theory: The Logic of Science*, ch. 1.

87. Pierre-Simon Laplace, *Essai philosophique sur les probabilités* (1814).



our possibility of obtaining such proof, which would not be the proposition we are assessing probabilistically. The phenomenon itself is by hypothesis necessitated by prior causes, and thus probability is just a way to expound necessity when we have insufficient informations to fully describe it.

If, on the other hand, the phenomenon is itself non-deterministic, we would slide toward an objective/physical interpretation. By this label here I mean any view according to which probabilities correspond to real properties of objects or systems. Thus, the probability of a die to come up six, or of a radioactive atom to decay within a given time, is determined neither by logic nor by our beliefs, but rather by the physical properties of either object. The oldest form of this interpretation is frequentism,<sup>88</sup> which sees probabilities as limit frequencies over infinite repetitions. To correct for perceived shortcomings, most notably the inapplicability to single-case events (which, is the whole of social science, since while a proton is a proton is a proton, no socio-political event is repeatable in a strict sense), other objective views have been elaborated, most notably a family of “propensity” interpretations.<sup>89</sup> Be as it may, the common character of all these positions is that

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88. John Venn, *The Logic of Chance* (London: Macmillan, 1876); Hans Reichenbach, *The Theory of Probability* (Berkeley Ca: University of California Press, 1949); Richard von Mises, *Probability, Statistics and Truth* (New York: Macmillan, 1957); Gillies, *Philosophical Theories of Probability*, ch. 5.

89. Charles S. Peirce, “The Doctrine of Chances,” in *Illustrations of the Logic of Science*, ed. Cornelis de Waal (Chicago IL: Open Court, 2014); Karl Popper, “The Propensity Interpretation of Probability,” *British Journal of the Philosophy of Science* 10, no. 1 (1959); James H. Fetzer, “Probability and Objectivity in Deterministic and Indeterministic Situations,” *Synthese* 57, no. 3 (1983); Karl Popper, *World of Propensities* (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1990); David W. Miller, *Critical Rationalism. A Restatement and Defence* (Chicago IL: Open Court, 1994), ch. 9; Gillies, *Philosophical Theories of Probability*, chs. 6-7.

probabilities are seen as attributes of the described phenomena. Nothing more is necessary to see how these probabilities also reduce possibilities to the domain of necessity.

When we say that a given process has a probability of producing an outcome, in fact, we are not talking about different possibilities, but rather describing a necessary configuration of facts. Thus, it is necessary that a fair coin will approximate half heads and half tails on a large number of tosses and, on an orthodox frequentist view (which is also strictly operationalist), it is a necessity because we have already measured it happening.<sup>90</sup> Likewise, the propensity toward a given distribution means that there is a property producing the results in the proportion observed. A propensity is conceived of in analogy with physical concepts such as force *etc.*,<sup>91</sup> for the point of postulating its existence is to explain probabilistic distributions as necessary consequences of such property, or cause, if you will. Propensities, indeed, can be seen as a probabilistic generalization of causes,<sup>92</sup> although this is contentious.<sup>93</sup> As Popper himself noted, propensities are similar to Aristotle's potentialities, except for the fact (which is however irrelevant to the present context) that they are referred to systems and not to objects.<sup>94</sup>

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90. Venn, *The Logic of Chance*, 83-84.

91. Popper, "The Propensity Interpretation of Probability," 27-28.

92. "Causation is just a special case of propensity: the case of a propensity equal to 1": Popper, *World of Propensities*, 20.

93. Gillies, *Philosophical Theories of Probability*, 129-35.

94. Popper, "The Propensity Interpretation of Probability," 37-38. The similarity is even clearer in Peirce's definition: "I am, then, to define the meaning of the statement that the probability, that if a die be thrown from a dice box it will turn up a number divisible by three, is one-third. The statement means that the die has a certain "would-be"; and to say that the die has a "would-be" is to say that it has a property, quite analogous to any habit that a man might have. Only the "would-be" of the die is presumably as much simpler and more definite than the man's habit as the die's homogeneous composition and cubical shape is simpler than the nature of the man's nervous system and soul...": Peirce, "The Doctrine of Chances," 125. The essay was first published in 1893, but the quoted passage was added in 1910.

Between the alternative meanings of causality and potentiality, one and the same if we followed Hobbes,<sup>95</sup> what remains clear is that a propensity interpretation of probability has as little to do with possibilities as the other ones. This is better understandable by considering what motivated Popper to elaborate such an interpretation, that is to say the use of probabilities in quantum mechanics (this is as far as it gets from political science, but such is the background against which this interpretation was developed).<sup>96</sup> There the point of employing probabilities is precisely to reduce a non-deterministic phenomenon to terms of necessity. The wave function, assigning a probability amplitude,<sup>97</sup> does itself describe an univocal and necessary configuration, even if the specific values are indeterministic. In Heisenberg's words:

“The probability wave of Bohr, Kramers, Slater, however, meant more than that; it meant a tendency for something. It was a quantitative version of the old concept of “*potentia*” in Aristotelian philosophy.”<sup>98</sup>

*Mutatis mutandis*, the same would be true for any application of propensities. If by describing a socio-political phenomenon in probabilistic terms we meant that the overall situation produced a propensity, tendency, or disposition toward realizing certain results, we would then be describing the way in which a system necessarily behaves (even if specific outcomes may not be determinable). Whether by describing a distribution that has already happened, as in classical fre-

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95. *Supra*, p. 119, fn. 20.

96. About the application of a propensity theory to social sciences, see: Malcolm Williams, “Single Case Probabilities and the Social World: The Application of Popper’s Propensity Interpretation,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 29, no. 2 (1999).

97. The difference between ordinary probability and probability amplitude as employed in quantum physics is not relevant here.

98. Werner Heisenberg, *Physics & Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 41.

quentism, or by assigning an index to propensities to produce certain results, objective probabilities have little to do with the category of possibility.

Finally, while history by itself is not sufficient to prove a conceptual point – though it may inductively contribute to make it more probable, if you will – the way in which probabilistic and statistical methods have been refined and applied on a large scale to government and administration, from the nineteenth century onwards, is also harmonic to the idea that they serve not to express possibilities, but rather to reduce them to a necessary order. *The Taming of Chance* is, indeed, the aptest title one could have chosen for such a history.<sup>99</sup>

### 3.3. Understanding power: possibilities beyond causality

Having observed how probabilities are employed as subsets of necessity, we can connect back to causality. Political science is shaped by causal approaches, often seeking the help of probabilistic analyses. If a cause is certain ( $p=1$ ), it most clearly has to do with necessity. Causes that are not immediately sufficient hinge on probability, in the sense that they will bring about their effects not certainly, but only with some propensity. However, as we just saw, probability does not refer to an open space of possibilities, but rather to the necessary frequency of an event through repeated iterations, or the propensity to produce such frequency (objective interpretations), or to degrees of belief about those configurations of results (Bayesian). Even when employed from an actor's per-

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99. Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

spective, as in game theory, probability is still used to determine the necessarily best course of action.

For a short formula, we could have that while “power” denotes the certainty of a possibility, “probability” describes the uncertainty of a necessity.

Political science has an intrinsic propensity to expunge “power”, because it purports to study that which happens to be, and be under causal connections (if not “laws” properly so called) – not what could or could not be, which would be the possible object of politics. “Being” itself, in a sense, denotes a modality of necessity. Metaphysically, “being” is not necessarily the same as “being necessary”: things and phenomena may come to be contingently.<sup>100</sup> As previously discussed, however, our point of view is not metaphysical. From a linguistic and phenomenological perspective, it is evident that whatever “is” bears upon us as a necessity. Actual things and events can be the realization of some past possibility, thus metaphysically contingent, but at any given moment anything that happened to be would no longer be merely possible, but rather necessary and necessitating from our perspectives as actors. Even things and situations we have the power to change bears as necessities in a sense, as they require some effort to be changed, always limiting the extent of what is possible.

An exclusive focus on causality, however, is what truly erases “power”. What causation does is to establish a necessary sequence – which is no less necessary when probabilities are involved, as

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100. Arguably, all of them do, if one does not believe in a teleological cosmology and/or philosophy of history. Even a fully determinist position, absent an initial authorship or final *telos*, could only ascribe the beginning of the causal chain to pure chance.

what changes is merely the delimitation of what counts as an effect<sup>101</sup> – so that even if the cause itself is contingent, the effect which follows is necessary relatively to it. This may be a necessary part of our understanding of power, provided that the account remains open to non-causal elements. But if the claim for causality is exclusive, then the space of the possible, and power along with it, is always pushed, so to speak, one step beyond our understanding.

Thus, we can observe that Congress has the power to pass laws, which will then cause some effects. No political scientist, though, would be content without enquiring what causes Congress to pass such and such laws, and thus we would go one step further and perhaps take the power of the individual lawmakers as our exogenous variable. That, probably, would also be unsatisfying, and so we would perhaps consider the pressures from voters, lobbyists, donors, foreign countries, and so on. Now those actors would be the ones with power. A very good scientist, however, would also want to know what caused their behaviors, and off we go to examine further exogenous causes: social class, culture, religion, history, *etc.* We would discover more and more necessary causal connections hiding under what appeared to be possibilities before actors.

The necessity of what is and the possibilities of what could be are, nevertheless, related. What we could do and achieve is always, at least partly, determined by the situation that happens to be. As already noted, causality is not the same as, but may be related to, power, in that if a power is not the power to cause something it may hardly be called power (for a sufficiently broad interpretation of causation). Likewise, probabilistic reasoning, insofar as used to better describe that

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101. *Supra*, p. 126.

which is, and to aid in determining causal relations, can say something relevant for power, even if by itself it cannot be *about* power. Whether it is interpreted as a subjective belief or as an objective statement, in fact, probability is applicable to events, not to persons as actors, without whom we could grasp neither power nor politics.

From what we have observed, it follows that what is currently understood as “political science” may contribute to the knowledge of politics, but cannot exhaust it, and the reason why it cannot is that by design it focuses on those aspects that have nothing specifically political about them.

We should recall from the previous chapter how the meaning of power was approached through the ideas of subjectivity and objectivity, then subsumed by worldliness, personality, and representation.<sup>102</sup> Now, by its own self-understanding, current political science may concern itself with that subset of politics that is reducible to objective reality under causal laws, which would be the world when considered as given. In relation to power and politics, that would be a subset of a subset; one that surely must be considered, harmonically to a phenomenological approach which eschews the flights from reality of many philosophies.<sup>103</sup> At the same time, those objective aspects are what politics has in common with any other human activity since, whatever one may think of the specifics of Arendt’s phenomenology,<sup>104</sup> it remains the case that our condition is predicated upon living in a world made of objects. Basic and unavoidable as it is, though, the objectivity that is part of our condition is not specific to politics, as modally defined by power. Conditioned, as

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102. *Supra*, pp. 59 ff.

103. *Supra*, pp. 69 ff.

104. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, ch. 4.

everything is, by the objectivity of our world, power denotes what goes beyond said objectivity: possibilities open before us as persons.

What, then, would be an appropriate way to study politics? I shall not pretend to have a detailed answer to offer here but, focusing on the question of how to be able to take power into account, we can briefly examine some alternatives.

A first way could be for current political science to come to terms with its being misnamed, constituting one social science amongst others, with no special claim to the domain of politics. If such a science needed a definite domain (which it may not, such categorial questions being quite out of fashion), it could perhaps default on either the State or coercion. These would not specify politics in any meaningful sense,<sup>105</sup> but could be as good as any an individuation for a sector of social science.<sup>106</sup> This might indeed be a science of “government”, a name brought by some of its most prestigious departments. Under this guise, such apolitical political science could be used both by actors and thinkers as a source of informations, useful for either action, normative theorizing, or just general understanding. Politicians and philosophers might draw upon such a science, just as they draw upon history, sociology, economics, anthropology, *et cetera*.

This way could provide coherence, but it would not seem attractive otherwise. Even ardent supporters of causal inferences would likely feel queasy about such a strict limitation of their domain of inquiry. Most of them, after all, really are interested in power, in what we can and cannot

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105. *Cf. supra*, p. 115 fn. 12.

106. This is close to what is already happening, since the old-fashioned definition of political science in terms of power was largely based on the identification of power with a form of coercion.



achieve politically, even while their methodological commitments tend to cut them off from a proper understanding of politics. On the other hand, a stricter compartmentalization would likely make the external “users” of this science even less prepared to assess the provided data than they already are. Coherence would be purchased at the cost of providing less relevant data to people who would be less able to understand them.

The underlying conceptual problem is that, while “power” may represent the specific difference of politics, individuating it as a domain that cannot be captured by causal analysis, a simple addition of causal plus non-causal (that is to say, narrative, contextual-historical, normative, and conceptual) elements would not suffice either. This is so because, as we discussed at some length, power itself, in the double application of the category of possibility, refers at once to objective-factual and subjective-representational perspectives. It is, indeed, only in the intertwining of the two perspectives that the concept of power, and thus politics, may have any proper meaning. Absent either, our engagement with politics would be condemned to oscillate between causal-empirical analyses, with no space for possibility, and representational fantasies, where possibilities would make no contact with a worldly reality – as it may be the case for some, or many, normative theories.

The notion of “chance”, with its ambivalent meaning, well conveys the difference we are trying to pinpoint here. It can be synonymous with likelihood and probability, as in “the chance a coin fall head”. From an actor’s perspective, though, a chance is precisely an opportunity to act, which may be taken or not, to which it makes no sense to apply the machinery of probability. This brings

us back to Max Weber – who set up so much of the framework within which social scientists still operate – whose definition of power (*Macht*) was briefly mentioned but not examined in the first chapter.<sup>107</sup> Only now we are in the position to fully recognize the difference with the definitions, seemingly so similar, given by Dahl and others.

To be clear, I do not intend to ascribe my own intentions to Weber, but the fact remains that such language lend itself to a perspicuous understanding. This becomes apparent if we look at the relevant text, as aptly re-translated by Isidor Walliman:<sup>108</sup>

Within a social relationship, power means any chance, (no matter whereon this chance is based) to carry through one's\* own will (even against resistance).

\* individual or collective

This *Chance*, in German as in English, may convey the double meaning that the achievement of the result has to be possible both in the sense of not being necessary (from an actor's perspective) and of being likely to cause the desired result. For there being power, there has to be a possibility, an opportunity, a chance to take action, which will have a probability, a likelihood, a chance, to achieve the desired results. This chance has to be "one's (individual or collective)", for if it were a chance/probability of some event happening without authorship, there would be no

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107. *Supra*, p. 9, fn. 19.

108. Isidor Walliman, "On Max Weber's Definition of Power," *Journal of Sociology* 13, no. 3 (1977), 234. The most commonly cited, but highly misleading, translation is by Talcott Parson, "The probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests": Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 152. The German would be: "*Macht* bedeutet jede Chance, innerhalb einer sozialen Beziehung den eigenen Willen auch gegen Widerstreben durchzusetzen, gleichviel worauf diese Chance beruht": Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriß der Verstehenden Soziologie* (1922), § 16.

power involved. Another way to express this is that we can attribute a chance, but not probabilities or causes, to an actor *qua* actor. We can for sure say that the action of a person was caused by *x*, or had a certain probability of happening, but in doing so we would be reducing it to a sort of necessity, thus stripping the person of its authorship.

Authorship is primary in assessing power also in another sense. Having a probability of success, which is the same as having a probability of causing the effects counting as “success” in the given context, is not a measure of power. The power is always effected in performing the action, its results are outside of power in the sense that if any given result were certain, then it would be inseparable from the action, whereas if it were uncertain there would not be a power to achieve it (*ex ante* we could say that there is a certain probability, but no certainty, that one truly has the power in question).

Thus, in saying that a general has the power to command his subordinates we mean that he will certainly succeed in commanding them; were there doubts about it, then he would not have that power. For this specific power to be there, the result of obtaining obedience shall be coextensive with the act of demanding it. If an outcome, say winning a battle, is uncertain, we would not ordinarily say that the general had the power of winning the battle. He may have had the power to start it, but (unless victory was thoroughly certain) whether he had the power to win it can be assessed only after the facts, and then only if said facts can entirely and exclusively be imputed to the actions of the general (which seems unlikely to ever be the case).

Similarly, we may say that “the President had the power to end the war”, by which we mean that she could obtain such result with certainty, and thus her action could be described as “causing the end of the war”. If, instead, the President only had a certain probability of ending the war, we wouldn’t properly say that it was in her power to do so. It may be possible for her to succeed, but it is not a possibility at her disposal, as it would be required to recognize the power to end the war. We could either be uncertain on whether she had in fact enough power to achieve the result (if we were Bayesians) or we could say that she has enough power to increase the probability of ending the war, but not to determine the result (under an objective interpretation). There the actions within the President’s power would be described as separate from the result to be achieved. She has the power to issue orders, or to perform such and such diplomatic actions, which could succeed or fail; the results being separated from the action, from the point of view of assessing power, simply by their uncertainty. After the fact, probabilities collapse into certainties, and any attempt either succeeded or failed (though judgments might be contentious). Consequently, we could say that the President had indeed the power to end the war if her attempts succeeded – assuming her actions caused the outcome and that those actions were possible, not causally necessary, for her to take. If the war did not end, we could conclude that the President did not have the power to end it, provided we agreed that she tried all that was possible for her at the time.

The judgment about the presence or absence of power depends on the characteristic mix of “subjective” and “objective”, personal and worldly, elements, but while probability may take part in

assessing the second kind, by ascertaining causal links, it is in no sense a “measure” of power.<sup>109</sup>

The measure of how much power someone has is always partly qualitative, or rather it is not a measure at all, but a judgment based on the assessment and comparison of qualitative, narrative, hermeneutical descriptions.

Quantitative elements of course enter into such assessment – *e.g.* the power of governing over a large nation is, *ceteris paribus*, larger than the power of governing a small one. But even then, the relevance of numbers is itself contextual (and the *cetera* are never *paria* in politics), as there are cases in which “more” does not equal more power. More concretely, larger socio-political structures tend to bring stricter constraints along with more potentialities. The two most general non-quantifiable elements that have to be considered in any assessment of power are first the judgment on the relevance of the actions in question and their effects and, secondly, the judgment about whether said actions were indeed possible, not just necessitated behaviors, from the perspective of the actor whose power is being assessed.

The exercise of judgment, in the most general sense of connecting particular instances to general concepts in the absence of ready-made rules of application,<sup>110</sup> would characterize the whole of the integrated approach which would be necessary to capture politics, as a domain defined by

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109. Whether this is in contrast with Weber’s definition depends on how we interpret it. On the one hand “chance” can be synonymous with “possibility”, so that when we say that a person had the chance/possibility to achieve something we meant that they would surely have achieved it if they tried. On the other hand, the determination of “chance” in terms of probabilities is also relevant, for if a general has a 60% chance of winning the battle he is, *ceteris paribus*, more powerful than his adversary who only has a 40% chance. One has more power than the other – most likely because he has the power to employ more of the relevant *potentiae*, such as soldiers, artillery, intelligence services, *etc.* – even if neither has *the* power of winning the battle.

110. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 268 [KrV B172]; Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 4.

power. Judgment is here to be understood in a broad sense, corresponding to modes of understanding usually characterized as qualitative, interpretive/hermeneutical, and normative. We have to maintain this broad understanding, against the limitation of judgment to the moral/normative domain. Judgment is evaluative in the fuller sense, pertaining to any evaluation of “x counts as y”. Judgment is normative because it assigns meanings, but that is a superset of normativity understood as what ought to be, or would be dutiful in a moral sense.

A shade of the connection between judgment the the intrinsic evaluative character of discourses about power can be observed in the “essential contestability” thesis.<sup>111</sup> More recently, Rainer Forst went further, claiming that power would have an “essentially *noumenal* nature”.<sup>112</sup> The recurring emphases of the normative dimension of power – *vis-à-vis* the still prevailing, and no less unilateral, “realist” reduction of it to causative/objective factors – clearly do not correspond to the ordinary meaning of the concept, yet they highlight its inherently representational side.

Partly as a result of Arendt’s engagement with this faculty, relying on the distinction between Kant’s reflective and determinant judgments, the role played by judgment has been largely constructed in opposition to the general theorizing that is common in normative political theory.<sup>113</sup>

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111. *Supra*, p. 41. Taken literally, the thesis was wrong, since it is not true that we always use “power” in conjunction with normative judgments of just and unjust, good and evil. The use of “power”, however, implies evaluative judgments which have the same structure as the narrower subset of the “normative” ones in the narrower sense.

112. Forst, *Normativity and Power*, 37. We will further discuss Forst’s, and more generally Critical Theory’s, engagement with power at *infra* §4.2.

113. *Supra*, fn. 28, p. 68. Here we are not primarily interested in evaluating Arendt’s engagement with Kant, and with judgment in general. My understanding is that by developing the connection between power and judgment, as defining and rendering intelligible the domain of politics (and therefore not limited to moral/normative judgment), what we are here doing is both based on and broadly consistent with Arendt’s thought; but it is the argument we are here seeking, not hermeneutical faithfulness.

This is, however, a reductive view, for the quality of not being reducible to a rule pertains to both reflective and determinant judgments in equal measure. Even when the general concept is given, for determinant judgments, the act of conjoining it with the appropriate intuition cannot be rule-bound precisely because it is itself the application of a rule.<sup>114</sup> If this were not the case, it would not have made sense for Kant to write that judgment is a “talent that cannot be taught but only practiced”.<sup>115</sup>

Here we are using “judgment” roughly in the same sense as “making a judgment call”, with an intrinsic connection to the judge’s perspective. Such meaning corresponds to power, as it is only through judgment that possibilities – which by definition are never facts or phenomena, though they can be judiciously derived from those – may be assessed. Judgment may be idiosyncratic, or arbitrary in a pejorative sense, but it does not have to be, for the quality of being bound to a particular perspective and not being reducible to a logical rule pertains equally to the most mundane and commonly shared judgments. Judgment calls, indeed, are unavoidable even in rigorous scientific endeavors, and all the more so for the relatively “soft” social sciences.

An obvious example is the constructions of the variables upon which causal and probabilistic analyses are then developed. These conceptual-hermeneutic judgments, when they are not left entirely implicit, are commonly relegated to a few paragraphs in the methodology sections of political science’s books and articles, but they are as relevant as the raw facts they organize into use-

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114. Compare with Wittgenstein’s reflections on the “paradox” of rule-following: Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§201-202.

115. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 268 [KrV B172]; Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 4.

able data. In a sense, a better way for political science would be simply to remain open to the qualitative, hermeneutical, conceptual and historical approaches which, important as they have been for the “prehistory” of political science, are being increasingly marginalized by the rise of quantitative methods. This may be read under the fashionable rubric of “interdisciplinarity” or the less fashionable, but entirely equivalent, “de-specialization”.

The simplistic quantitative *vs.* qualitative juxtaposition, however, is insufficient to capture our issue, for we have seen how even the proposers of methodological pluralism and qualitative research explain and justify their endeavor in terms of causal analysis.<sup>116</sup> Such an attitude, presenting hermeneutic and narrative approaches in terms of their usefulness in establishing causality, is not new, going at least as far back as Weber himself, who defined sociology – a paradigm of qualitative/hermeneutical social science – as “... a science concerning itself with the *interpretive understanding* of social action *and thereby with a causal explanation* of its course and consequences.”<sup>117</sup>

The analysis of the concept of power allowed us to uncover how the issue concerns causality as such, and even more deeply with the exclusive focus on the ordering of an objective world, to the exclusion of what is merely possible. Qualitative/interpretive approaches may be necessary – in the sense that it is impossible to represent and express possibilities without availing oneself of the full resources of a non-formalized language – but their being “qualitative” is not sufficient, as

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116. *Supra*, p. 112.

117. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1978), 4, emphasis added.



shown by their commonly being justified through their alleged usefulness in establishing causality.

It should be clear that here I am not trying to devalue causal approaches, but merely to explain how they are intrinsically insufficient, even though often necessary, to understand power, and therefore politics. Examining causal processes is an entirely proper thing to do for political scientists, provided they are aware it is not the only thing to do. Whether the broader approach needed to encompass politics could count as “science” is another matter; it surely would not under the assumption that all that science does is to establish causal connections. Indeed, even the most basic idea of science as knowledge of that which is would not fully apply to politics and power, for they inherently refer to what is merely possible and, unlike Aristotle’s potentialities, may never come to be.<sup>118</sup>

The same reasoning would of course apply to all social sciences, insofar as they take similar methodological stances. The problem for sociology, economics, *etc.*, however, is not strictly the same, because their objects of study are not modally defined by power. Therefore, from their perspective, the forgetfulness of power may or may not be an issue, depending on whether power is deemed relevant to explain the social phenomena at hand. This is quite different from the self-contradiction of an attempt to explain politics without cognizance of power.<sup>119</sup> Thus, it is perhaps

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118. *Supra*, pp. 85 ff.

119. It is possible to maintain that considerations about power should enter in all social/human sciences. That, however, depends on a metaphysical commitment about power really existing and being fundamental for our being humans – which may be correct, but is still different from the concept itself being constitutive of a domain of study, here politics, regardless of its actual existence or not.

ironical that political science nowadays seems to be the one most strictly focused on causal explanations.<sup>120</sup>

Lest anyone accuse me of being partial to the side of political theory or philosophy, however, we shall now move on to examine how distinctively non-causal, normative/historical/hermeneutical approaches, are also employed in such ways as to expunge power from their conceptual perspectives.

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120. Studies that approximately correspond to the understanding of power here discussed, analyzing both causal factors, histories, and the self-representation of the world and their own possibilities within it from the actors' perspectives, can more easily be found within sociology. A good example is Gaventa's early work: John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (1980). That is, however, for the most part true only implicitly, as the understanding of power was derived from the debates examined in our first chapter, and the overall goal can still be seen as causal-explanatory. The book is singled out for praise by Morriss as well, but he did not focus on the non-causal factors either: Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, 151.

## 4. Power and political theory: domination, normativity, teleology

In this chapter we will examine how the concept of power tends to be erased by and from political theory/philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Similarly to what we observed concerning political science, this will not mean that the approaches here criticized are incorrect or untrue, but only that they end up expelling “power” from their perspectives, despite ostensibly referring to it. Here, however, we would not need to step outside of the methods of the criticized discipline. This is so because,

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1. I will use the two terms as equivalent, unless otherwise specified, mainly because what it would be “political theory” in the Anglo-American world would most often be called “political philosophy” elsewhere, whereas in analytical circles “political philosophy” is still mostly conceived of in moral terms, *e.g.*: Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). We could use Arendt’s distinction between political theory and philosophy, the former being the correct stance to understand power, and therefore politics (as discussed in our § 2.1), with the latter failing to do so due to being prey of teleological/transcendent ways of thought. Incidentally, this could alleviate the lack of clarity, or inconsistency, alleged by some of Arendt’s readers, *e.g.*: Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy*, chs. 1, 7. However, while this differentiated use might help to hold tight onto the conceptual distinction, it could also create additional confusion when referencing thoughts from a different framework, so that we would have to always specify whether we are using political theory/philosophy in Arendt’s sense or not. To avoid the issue, we will hold to the most inclusive meaning, taking together theory and philosophy without embedding the finer distinctions into our terminology.

while political science has some measure of unity, at least at the abstract level of employing causality as the governing concept, political theory has no methodological or thematic unity.

In broad terms, political theorists mainly do four things, often intermixed together: history of political thought, conceptual analysis, normative philosophy and “diagnoses of the times” (as, for example, in classical philosophies of history, or more recently in Habermas’ theory of modernity, language, reason and democracy).<sup>2</sup> The first two modes of theorizing would not seem to have any intrinsic problem with “power”; they may not possess a clear concept simply because it has not yet been properly defined. The latter two, instead, have internal reasons for expelling power from their frameworks and, through various examples, will be the focus of this chapter.

While political scientists “forget” power largely because it cannot be captured within accepted methodologies, political philosophers tend to either ignore or distort the concept because it does not comport with their substantive political and moral theories.<sup>3</sup> Such theories are themselves diverse and, due to the aforementioned disciplinary fragmentation, relatively resistant to be unified under a single rubric. This is not to say that there might not be an underlying logic explaining political philosophy’s attitude toward power. To the contrary, two broad tendencies appear quite

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2. The term *Gegenwarts-diagnose* (literally “present-diagnosis”) is employed by Habermas to describe Weber’s theory of modernity: Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 1. Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), ch. 2. Here we are using it as a more general label, to cover any similarly socio-historical diagnostics, including those having a more limited scope, such as the common discussions about the condition of our liberal-democracies *etc.*

3. The distinction is not perfectly neat, since goals and methods do intertwine early and often, but it may be useful as an approximation to underscore that, while political philosophy would also have to accept limits to some of its pretenses, what is at stake here are not methods but rather substantive conceptions. With a crude, but perhaps effective, formula we might say that political scientists cannot handle power, because the category of possibility lies beyond their conceptual apparatus, whereas theorists and philosophers could but do not want to handle it, because possibility do not comport with other things they want (more than they want to understand power).

clearly: there is first a normative hostility toward power, mostly conceived of under its aspects of power-over/domination and at the opposite there is a tendency to reduce power to a positively oriented potentiality.

Both these tendencies, indeed, perform the same kind of transformation upon “power” – stripping it of the unpredictability implied by the idea of open possibilities – only taking opposite evaluative stances about the resulting concept. Thus, that “power” which is mostly reduced to power-over or domination – themselves reified into potentialities to exert control<sup>4</sup> – is decried, quite correctly after such reduction, because it hinders freedom, as we shall see in § 4.1. On the other hand (§4.2), a more “positive” appreciation of power is predicated on the teleological persuasion that such power will lead to certain desired results, rather than being open to indefinite possibilities. In this sense, once again conflating power with potentiality, these two ways of erasing our concept cohere not only amongst themselves, but also with political science’s own erasure of power.

Before diving into the analysis we just sketched, it should be explicitly recognized that for as many instances of the aforementioned tendencies we might produce, they could never constitute a logical argument, but only a historical one. That is necessarily the case because political philosophy/theory, unlike political science, does not possess a methodological self-understanding,<sup>5</sup> upon

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4. We briefly noted how the power-over/domination subset of power is close to the idea of power as causation; see *supra*, p. 105. After having gone through the analyses of the previous chapter, now we can better see how the reason for this closeness, most apparent in Dahl, is that both power-over and causation correspond to the image of a potentiality oriented toward a specific actualization.

5. There are philosophies, in the plural, each with their own, different, methodological commitments. But there is no overarching model covering all that is ordinarily called “political philosophy” or “political theory”, and there are of

which it could be held accountable as a whole. Be as it may, even such a “history of ‘power’” would be too broad for the boundaries of the present work, which at most may sketch some parts of it. Thus, we will proceed by examining examples, and our arguments will be explicitly limited to them. The reader will have to judge whether such examples are sufficiently representative; either way, they at least will show how consequential conceptual confusion may be where it actually exists.

#### 4.1. “Power” as a negative concept

Freedom, or at any rate a family of conceptions of freedom, represents the main normative ideal of modern political thought, and arguably the defining concept for politics across all times.<sup>6</sup> Such freedom is most commonly construed in opposition to power or, as we may now better see, in opposition to a subset of power corresponding to the ideas of power-over and/or domination. This is why these latter concepts, and power as such when it gets conflated with them, tend to have negative connotations. Here we have, first, to better clarify the meaning of power-over and domination, as increasingly narrow sub-concepts which may, nevertheless, be specified in such ways as to become detached from the meaning of power as a modality of possibility. We will, then, move on to consider how liberal political thought (broadly meant) is drawn to conflate power into power-over and domination, and thence to frame it as a normatively negative concept.

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course many theories/philosophies that do not pursue methodological rigor at all.

6. Arendt, “Introduction Into Politics”; Arendt, “What is Freedom?”. Here I disagree with Villa’s contention that this would be a modern idea: Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, 44.

#### 4.1.1. Power-over and its reification

“Power-over” is a relatively simple concept, while domination is more complex, partly because its modern meaning is normatively connoted,<sup>7</sup> and partly because its semantic baggage goes farther back in history. Both the simple “power-over” and the complex “domination”, however, share the tendency to be objectified, shifting from denoting subsets of power toward becoming different concepts, with meanings even opposite to power as a modality of possibility. This shift feeds into the portrayal of power as opposed to freedom, because the only actor it leaves us with is the one experiencing the imposition of an external power, removing the one who would be wielding such power and thus could be considered free.<sup>8</sup> Since “domination” is largely a further specification of “power-over”, here we will start by more closely analyzing the meaning of the latter and how it gets to be reified.

“Power-over”, easily enough, denotes the kind of power that may be exercised over something. In the broadest sense this “something” could be anything, but ordinarily we would say that “A has power over B...” when both A and B are actors, be they individual or collective persons. When “power-over” is related to inanimate objects or phenomena, the use is either metonymical or metaphorical. Thus, a King may have “power over the land”, by which it is meant “power over the people inhabiting and/or owning such land”. God may have “power over life and death”,<sup>9</sup> or we

7. Domination is, in this sense, properly one of those “essentially contested concepts”. In fact, the reason why power has been deemed a concept of such kind is precisely its confusion with the more specific meaning of domination (*infra*, p. 41).

8. It is of course another matter whether relations of domination impair the freedom of both the dominant and the dominated parts; which I believe they do, but that is an empirical, not conceptual, point.

9. *Wisdom of Solomon*, 10:13.

might say that Prospero had power over the tempest, and so on for similar “powers” over the natural (or supernatural) universe.

However, we would not ordinarily say that I have power over my chair, except perhaps jokingly, even though I could do whatever I wished with/to it. Indeed, those religious or magical uses of the locution appears to be predicated upon a residual attribution of anthropomorphic qualities to inanimate objects. Thus, even if technology literally gave us something like “power over the wind”, that is to say the possibility to control such natural phenomenon however we saw fit, it would still sound off-key to pronounce just such phrase, unless we wanted to appear magniloquent or poetic. On the other hand, saying that you have power over me, or conversely that I am in your power, may be taken literally without sounding particularly strange.

Thus, “power-over” is the power of persons over persons (either individual or collective). As already mentioned,<sup>10</sup> this can be further analyzed as a relation where someone has the possibility of affecting the possibilities available to someone else. This is why the uses in relation to non-persons are not literal, because objects and events do not “have” possibilities in the same sense as persons do.

The case, though, is not symmetrical for the one who possesses this power over others. To have such power in the proper sense, this one person has to have the possibility to affect the possibilities of others, both in the sense of being capable of causing the appropriate effects and of representing that possibility as such (rather than as some kind of necessitated behavior). What hap-

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10. *Supra*, p. 93.



pens, though, when one does not represent their affecting someone else as an available possibility, but rather as a necessity? Would we still say that the judge had power over the defendant if she perceived herself as bound by the law and her duty to apply it? Would we say that the bureaucrat had power over the citizen advancing some claim, if said bureaucrat's discretion were so constrained by norms and institutional pressures that he could not but respond in one specific way to the citizen's request? Would a CEO have power over the corporation they manage if their choices were thoroughly dictated by the imperative of profit?

Whether we would use "power-over" to talk about such situations depends on the assessment of concrete particulars, often hinging on whether we knew, and chose to take into account, the relevant representations of possibilities from the actors' points of view. We may not know, not believe, or anyway disregard, the fact that the judge sees herself as bound by the law, rather than free to choose between alternative courses of action. Thus we would represent her as powerful just by considering the fact that she can pronounce effectual sentences, and choosing to interpret that "can" as a possibility open before her, rather than as a potentiality to be actualized according to a law upon which the judge had little or no power. Or, conversely, we may believe what the judge says about her powerless condition under the law, without reckoning that she sees herself as very powerful, well capable to arbitrarily exercise discretion, and she just fed us a convenient narrative to better safeguard that very power. Either way, the assessment of the power in question would

depend on how we represent to ourselves the representation of possibilities from the judge's point of view, and our own representations could enhance or hinder her power.<sup>11</sup>

The availability of a worldly perspective – of which objectivity, and then a causal-scientific outlook on reality, are increasingly narrow subsets – make it so that even if we agreed that the judge, the bureaucrat, or the CEO, did not self-represent their respective conditions as open to different possibilities, and even if we were entirely correct in believing that to be the case, we could still say that those persons had power over the relevant others. All it takes is to focus not on their representations of possibilities, but rather to observe how those over whom this “power” might be exercised would be affected if it actually were. The emphasis would shift from “power” to “over”, so to speak.

This would be another instance of the slide from power as a modality persons finds themselves into, open to indeterminate possibilities, to power-as-potentiality, to be actualized into a specific result (or set thereof). Thus, when we say that the bureaucrat has power over the citizen, even while assuming that the former's behavior is thoroughly determined, what we more precisely mean is that the bureaucrat has a potential to affect the possibilities available to the citizen, even if the actualization of such potential may not be within the bureaucrat's own power. This use of power-over, as we may better see after having gone through the previous chapters, is closer to the

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11. It is very true that “Reputation of power, is power” (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, X.5.9), but the opposite representation of powerlessness might also, in some cases, enhance the possibilities available to the relevant actor.

concepts of causality than to the broader meaning of power, from which it may nevertheless be derived following the process of reification we just sketched out.

Once the potential effect over someone's possibilities is no longer within the power of someone else, just one more step is needed to complete the reification of "power-over" into a form of control, or discipline, with no one to impute such control to. Thus, impersonal objects like love, music, drugs, may all be said to have power over us, as they affect our possibilities in ways that are at least partly beyond our power, even while not necessarily being within the power of anyone else.

A similar reification process leads to those widespread ideas of "power" as indicating the set of limits and constraints shaping what would be "our" power. Thus we may get to "systemic power",<sup>12</sup> or just to "power" in the sense used (at times)<sup>13</sup> by Foucault, and many after him. These may be "powers" only in the restricted sense in which Hobbes could equate *potentia* with *causa*,<sup>14</sup> in that only the effects on the affected are at stake, regardless of whether the production of such effects

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12. The expression has been used across a variety of contexts but, while the specifics change, the objectified character of "systemic power" remains more or less constant. See for example: Edward W. Lehman, "Toward a Macrosociology of Power," *American Sociological Review* 34, no. 4 (1969); Silviu Brucan, "The Systemic Power," *Journal of Peace Research* 12, no. 1 (1975); Stone, "Systemic Power in Community Decision Making"; Borch, "Systemic Power"; "Agency-Structure Problem," in *Encyclopedia of Power*, ed. Keith Dowding (London: SAGE, 2011). Following Habermas' lead (see *infra* §4.2.1), here the "systemic" qualifier will primarily be understood in relation to Parsons and Luhmann: Talcott Parsons, *Structure and Process in Modern Societies* (1960); Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (London: Routledge, 2005); Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

13. The problem in attributing a specific use to Foucault is that his discourses about power shifted through time, and were not always congruent even within the same work. It is possible to reconstruct a coherent theory, reconciling seemingly contradictory statements as to whether power is imputable to subjects or not – e.g.: Heller, "Power, Subjectification and Resistance in Foucault." It is not clear, however, that Foucault himself possessed such a theory, especially considering how he was not so sure about his previous uses of "power" (*supra*, p. 27), as well as the anti-systematic quality of his work, which he analogized to a "... tool box which others can rummage through...": Michel Foucault, "Prisons et asiles dans le mécanisme du pouvoir," in *Dits et Ecrits vol. 11* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 523. Translation in: Clare O'farrell, *Michel Foucault* (London: Sage, 2005), 50.

14. *Supra*, pp. 98, 119.

were in the power of someone or not.<sup>15</sup> This detachment from agency, the “de-facement” of power as we saw,<sup>16</sup> has been presented as an especially radical position, but what is most relevant is how it represents a shift in the use of the word “power”, from a state of possibility to a form of necessity.

We are now in a position to see how these reified concepts of “power” – diverse as they are, from political science’s ideas about causality, to sociology’s “systemic power”, to Hayward’s “de-facement” – all cohere in transforming power properly so called into a definite potentiality for control. This may explain the tendency to fall into the “exercise” and “vehicle” fallacies we have observed in the first chapter.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the observed process of reification provides a conceptual explanation of the broader tendency to equate “power”, and therefore politics in general, with “rule”, so perspicuously criticized by Arendt.<sup>18</sup> While conceptual relations cannot by themselves be taken as causal, their proper understanding still represents a necessary condition for informed actions and theories.

In any case, this power-over, just like power in general, would seem to have no intrinsic normative connotation, in either its proper or “actor-less” sense. Whether power-over is good, bad, or

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15. It is perhaps ironic that Foucault’s “power”, being predicated on the rejection of what he understood as the modern paradigm of sovereignty, is much closer to the concept of power-as-*potentia* (and, thence, power-as-causation) held by Hobbes than to the ordinary meaning of the term. Cf. Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976* (New York: Picador, 2003); Barry Hindess, *Discourses of Power: From Hobbes to Foucault* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996).

16. *Supra*, pp. 25-30, 94.

17. *Supra*, pp. 17, 24.

18. Hannah Arendt, “The Great Tradition II. Ruling and Being Ruled,” *Social Research* 74, no. 4 (2007); Arendt, *The Human Condition*, §§ 2-6; Arendt, *On Violence*, 35-40.

possibly beyond good and evil, would seem to depend on the contingent situation. However, the fact that freedom has become such a prominent value in modern politics makes power-over, and thus power as such when the two are conflated, normatively suspicious at the very least. This pulls the concept closer to domination, and a full equation of power with domination would make it into an immediately anti-normative concept, denoting something which is evil by definition, even when admitted to be necessary in certain situations.

The tendency to conflate power with power-over and domination is typical of liberal political thought (though not necessarily shared in all its elements by each and every liberal), as we will examine more closely in § 4.1.3. Before getting to that, however, we have to say something more about current conceptualizations of domination.

#### 4.1.2. Domination

The concept of “domination” is richer than “power-over” (which, after all, is an academic creation, with little currency in ordinary language), and not merely for its negative connotations. Domination may be read as a subset of power-over in the sense that while there may be power-over without domination, the reverse would seem meaningless.<sup>19</sup> It could be argued that someone had power over others without that amounting to domination, for example when the respective interests are in alignment, or when the intensity and/or extension of such power-over is limited, but it would sound absurd to claim that I dominate you even while having no power over you.

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19. This holds true across ancient and modern meanings. The latter, on which we will focus here, are most properly subset of power-over, as they merely work by adding further specifications to it. The ancient meaning of domination, related as it was with the domestic dimension, is considerably different, but still the *dominus* had power over those who lived in his *domus*.

As a subset of “power-over”, domination shares the possibility of being reified which, as we just examined, depends on the form of the concept more than on the substantive/evaluative qualities attributed to it. Thus, while it would make no sense to say that I dominate you without having power over you, if the aforementioned reification is effected I can still dominate, and have power-over, without having power properly so called, that is to say being in a condition of power-as-potentiality, but not of power-as-possibility, as if I were not a person but an objective causative force.

The proximity between domination and power-over is underscored when the dictionary defines the former simply as a form of control:

Domination (noun): the exercise of control or influence over someone or something, or the state of being so controlled.<sup>20</sup>

That such a definition may be acceptable showcases the tendency to collapse domination with power-over. Dictionaries aside, attempts to fix more specific meanings of “domination”, distinguishing it from any generic form of control or influence, are often found amongst critics of prevailing liberal conceptualizations. This makes sense because singling out domination, as an especially problematic subset, could open the way to legitimize other forms of power, which might counteract domination itself.<sup>21</sup> However, even these specific definitions remain within a generally liberal horizon with regard to their understanding of power.

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20. *New Oxford American Dictionary*.

21. E.g. Mansbridge, “Using Power/Fighting Power: The Polity”; Amy Allen, *The Power of Feminist Theory* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1999).

Here we consider three, alternative but partly overlapping, meanings: domination as an especially thorough form of control,<sup>22</sup> domination as a power-over which is against the interests of the people affected,<sup>23</sup> and domination as arbitrary interference (as elaborated by neo-republican theorists). The first meaning is the closest to the dictionary definition, and thus to the conflation of domination with power as such, which may be observed with particular clarity in those who emphasize the reification of the concept, or its “systemic” quality. The second meaning is related to the Marxist critique of “false consciousness”, and enters directly into the “power debate” through Lukes, as noted in our first chapter. The third, “neo-republican”, meaning of domination we will discuss in some more detail, because in its, arguably failed, quest to differentiate itself from the prevailing liberal conceptualization of freedom, and thus power as its alleged antonym, it reveals at once the limits and the deep pervasiveness of such framework.

Most of the interventions in the “power debate”, as we saw at some length, are indeed about domination, in the sense of a form of power-over which is normatively negative. This is explicit in Lukes,<sup>24</sup> but equally evident when the equation of power with domination is not even thematized. The bulk of the debate may be seen as a set of critiques, followed by refinements and counter-reactions, to Dahl’s definition, which itself denoted a rather unspecified notion of power-over. As

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22. An extreme example would be the “total domination” effected by concentration camps: Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 437 ff. A similar meaning of “domination” as complete control, however, is at play in more mundane contexts, such as when we may say that a sport team dominated their adversaries in a game: Hearn, *Theorizing Power*, 30.

23. This is the concept Lukes discussed, first as “power”, and later as a subset of it: Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 12, 37-38, 64.

24. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 1, 12, 64-68, 74.

observed in the first chapter, these critiques and disagreement were empirical, not conceptual. They were engaged in discovering how the relatively neutered concept of power-over proposed by Dahl – then employed in empirical enquiries finding little of the “unpleasant” implications of the concept<sup>25</sup> – effectively hid more problematic instances of domination below the surface. By problematizing Dahl, considering more and more “faces” of power, the critics emphasized the anti-normative aspects of power, thus reinforcing the equation with domination rather than questioning it. Lukes’ *Radical View* is again the clearest example, as it criticizes how less radical authors understood the workings of power, but keeps its opposition to freedom. The second edition, as we saw,<sup>26</sup> recognizes that domination only covers a subset of power, but in the end is even more focused than the original essay on the juxtaposition of power-as-domination and freedom.

Foucault and the “ultra-radical” views he inspired differ in how they criticize the prevailing liberal viewpoints – partly because Foucault himself was not responding to the same debates – but share the focus on the assessment of socio-historical facts, not on the concept itself. Foucault constructed his histories in order to show that power does not correspond to the image of a constraining control he imputed to modern political thought.<sup>27</sup> In questioning such image, he argued that the reality of power as control or domination was more complex, implying resistance and creativity. Subjection is shown to have a counterpart in subjectification, thus advancing a claim

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25. Dahl, *Who Governs?*

26. *Supra*, p. 22.

27. E.g. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol.1*, 9-12; Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, Lecture 2.



about an empirical link between power and freedom;<sup>28</sup> but the meaning of power as subjection, and therefore its conceptual opposition to freedom, is not denied, being rather assumed as a starting point without which the empirical-historical critique would not be needed.<sup>29</sup> In fact, there would be little point in endeavoring to establish a connection between power/subjection and freedom/subjection through lengthy socio-historical analyses, if the two were already linked at the conceptual level.

Both mainstream and more radical positions usually remain within the horizon of a conceptual opposition between power-as-domination and freedom, even while contesting each others' empirical diagnoses. This attitude resonates well beyond academic circles, as testified by many vernacular exhortations to "fight the power". Such statements should give one pause, because even if power-over and domination are opposites to freedom – at least from the perspective of those who suffer them, in that one cannot be in the power or dominion of someone else and at the same time be free – power itself is closely related to freedom. In fact, the very opposition between being in the power of someone and being free shows at once the proximity between the two concepts, for the former means that someone have that power which would otherwise be ours. Now, the exact conceptual relation between power and freedom is contentious,<sup>30</sup> but it still seems clear that

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28. *Supra*, p. 93

29. As Allen aptly summarizes, Foucault's point is that "... productive power often *functions* repressively, just as repressive power often *functions* productively": Allen, *The Power of Feminist Theory*, 34 (emphasis added).

30. E.g. Pamela Pansardi, "Power and Freedom: Opposite or Equivalent Concepts?," *Theoria: A Journal of Social & Political Theory* 59, no. 132 (2012); Peter Morriss, "What Is Freedom if It Is Not Power?," *Theoria: A Journal of Social & Political Theory* 59, no. 132 (2012).

one cannot be at once powerless and yet free.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, freedom logically implies power, even if it may not entirely coincide with it.

There is, however, at least one group of theorists who explicitly question the prevailing understanding of freedom on a conceptual, not empirical, level. Those would be the “neo-roman” republicans, or just “neo-republicans”, chiefly represented by Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner,<sup>32</sup> who claim to rediscover a pre-liberal idea of freedom as non-domination. The neo-republicans are interesting here, because even while failing to differentiate themselves from the dominant liberal framework, they showcase how deeply our present conceptualizations are therein embedded. In many ways, neo-republicans end up emphasizing the consequences of the liberal outlook they are ostensibly criticizing.

The main claim of the neo-republicans is normative and historical at once, for they start from an idea of freedom as non-domination, against what they see as the liberal conception of freedom as non-interference, finding the roots of their “freedom” in the ancient Roman republic and in

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31. Although one could perhaps be “neither free nor unfree” when the power-as-potentiality, the capacity to perform the given action, is lacking: Matthew H. Kramer, *The Quality of Freedom* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), ch. 2.

32. For a broader overview, see also: John Maynor, *Republicanism in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003); Cécile Laborde, and John Maynor, eds. *Republicanism and Political Theory* (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2008).

those who have since been inspired by its example.<sup>33</sup> Everything, then, hinges on the concept of domination which, with some oscillations,<sup>34</sup> is thusly defined:

Domination, as I understand it here, is exemplified by the relationship of master to slave or master to servant. Such a relationship means, at the limit, that the dominating party can interfere on an arbitrary basis with the choices of the dominated: can interfere, in particular, on the basis of an interest or an opinion that need not be shared by the person affected.<sup>35</sup>

... domination – exposure to another’s power of uncontrolled interference...<sup>36</sup>

The first, and earlier, definition mixes the idea of arbitrary interference, which is the characterizing trait of these neo-republican perspectives, with that of such interference being against the interests of the dominated.<sup>37</sup> The second one is terser, and omits the reference to interests, but by adding the “uncontrolled” attribute it implies that only a more or less unlimited possibility of interference would constitute domination.

The first definition would lean toward the idea that “domination” should be reserved for something especially bad, excluding benevolent cases such as the control exercised by parents or teach-

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33. Thence the label of “neo-Roman” for this brand of republicanism, as opposed to the “neo-Athenians”, who allegedly emphasized political participation over non-domination as the salient trait of the tradition, the most conspicuous example being: John G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975). Arendt has been lumped together with the “neo-Athenian” republicans, but this was a facile interpretive error, see mine: Guido Parietti, “On the Autotelic Character of Politics,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 11, no. 1 (2012). For a critique of the anti-democratic aspects implicit in the Roman example see: Nadia Urbinati, “Competing for Liberty: The Republican Critique of Democracy,” *The American Political Science Review* 106, no. 03 (2012).

34. Cf. Samuel Arnold, and John R. Harris, “What is arbitrary power,” *Journal of Political Power* 10, no. 1 (2017).

35. Pettit, *Republicanism*, 22.

36. Philip Pettit, *On the People’s Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 28.

37. Cf. “Domination occurs where the power of some affects the interests of others by restricting their capabilities for truly human functioning”: Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 118.

ers over children.<sup>38</sup> This, however, would negate the core republican idea that a status of dependence is in itself undesirable. The second definition is better in that respect but, by accentuating the emphasis on the severity power-over should have to qualify as domination, it slides toward the other alternative definition, according to which it is the degree of control, or severity of interference, that makes the domination. This meaning is perhaps closer to ordinary language, but it is not particularly republican either, and may end up excluding milder forms of dependence which, again, should still be problematic for the neo-republican idea of freedom. One of the main points of alleged difference from liberalism, in fact, is precisely that neo-republicanism would take issue with dependence even when no, or only mild, interference occurs.<sup>39</sup>

The core idea of domination as arbitrary interference is more stable, but it fails to differentiate republicanism from liberalism. Despite the efforts of Pettit and Skinner, in fact, most liberals would be well in agreement with the idea of freedom as the absence of arbitrary interference, while well-justified and rule-bound interferences would be acceptable (though of course what qualifies as justified remains contentious).<sup>40</sup> Theoretically, the point has been exhaustively ar-

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38. Nevertheless, Pettit himself let us know how his own experience as a seminarist made him sensitive to the normative issues with being in some authority's power, even though in such cases there presumably is an alignment between the master's and the pupils's interests: Pettit, *Republicanism*, viii.

39. *Ibid.*, 73-74.

40. Frederick Hayek gave this as one of his definitions of freedom: "The state in which a man is not subject to coercion by the arbitrary will of another or others...", even connecting it back to Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, 982b): Frederick A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition* (Chicago IL: University Of Chicago Press, 2011), 58.

gued.<sup>41</sup> Historically, liberalism surely absorbed elements of a pre-existent republican tradition,<sup>42</sup> but once Skinner takes his account of liberty to be largely shared by none less than John Locke and John Stuart Mill,<sup>43</sup> we might wonder why would he ever be anything but a textbook liberal.

The apparent incoherence of mobilizing not one but two major forefathers of liberalism in the course of an argument ostensibly dedicated to differentiate one's own position from liberalism is explained by a very narrow view of the latter. The alleged liberal conception of freedom against which neo-republicans defined themselves, in fact, is reducible to Berlin's notion of negative freedom,<sup>44</sup> especially as projected backwards on the interpretation of Hobbes,<sup>45</sup> as the most formidable adversary of early modern republicans like Harrington, Milton, and others.<sup>46</sup>

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41. Ian Carter, "A Critique of Freedom as Non-Domination," *The Good Society* 9, no. 3 (2000); Charles Larmore, "A Critique of Philip Pettit's Republicanism," *Philosophical Issues* 11, no. 1 (2001); Matthew H. Kramer, "Liberty and Domination," in *Republicanism and Political Theory*, ed. Cécile Laborde, and John Maynor (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2008); Boudewijn De Bruin, "Liberal and Republican Freedom," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 4 (2009); Ronen Shnayderman, "Liberal vs. Republican Notions of Freedom," *Political Studies* 60, no. 1 (2012); Gerald Lang, "Invigilating Republican Liberty," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 62, no. 247 (2012). One could also note that "interference", as commonly employed, often already implies some nuances of arbitrariness, making the distinction even murkier from the point of view of ordinary language.

42. Perhaps liberalism really is "the most effective vacuum cleaner in the history of political thought": John S. Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 27.

43. Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), ix-x, 55n. To these august forefathers, Pettit added the contemporary examples of Raz and Gaus: Pettit, *Republicanism*, 10; Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Gerald F. Gaus, *The Modern Liberal Theory of Man* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1983). Even Hayek (see fn. 40 above) is considered an exception to the alleged liberal conceptualization of freedom: Pettit, *Republicanism*, 50. Again, considering the exceptions, one might well ask what is left of the rule.

44. Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

45. Pettit, *Republicanism*, 18, 37 ff. The projection of contemporary ideas of negative freedom onto Hobbes is itself questionable: Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics 3: Hobbes and Civil Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 214-15.

46. Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, 10-15; Quentin Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

The characterization of Hobbes as a liberal is obviously problematic;<sup>47</sup> and while Berlin surely adhered to liberalism as he understood it, such understanding, and the conception of negative freedom in particular, is not necessarily representative. Indeed, Berlin's famous essay bears all the signs of its time and, while it has been highly effective as the piece of political rhetoric that it was,<sup>48</sup> it is hardly an example of coherence and theoretical rigor. Skinner himself showed this very well, in one of the most respectful, affectionate even, yet devastating tear-downs one could write.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the meanings of negative and, especially, positive freedom, are not at all fixed within Berlin's essay; this likely worked to the advantage of its rhetorical success, but leaves one with little to argue about theoretically. It is perhaps a symptom of this relative lack of rigor that Berlin makes use of some eerily republican-sounding references:

Helvétius made this point very clearly: 'The free man is the man who is not in irons, not imprisoned in a gaol, *nor terrorized like a slave by the fear of punishment.*' It is not lack of freedom not to fly like an eagle or swim like a whale.<sup>50</sup>

In view of all these august liberals – Locke, Mill, Hayek, Berlin himself – endorsing something so close to a conception of freedom as non-domination, one could perhaps still argue for a difference of emphasis. Perhaps it is true that in worrying about arbitrary interference liberals are most

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47. David Johnston, "Liberalism," in *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, ed. Mark Bevir (London: SAGE, 2010), 796, 799.

48. I suspect, indeed, that the only appropriate target for the neo-republicans would be the facile use of "negative freedom" to justify anti-statist, pro-market and pro-corporation, policies (because only direct coercion would count as diminishing freedom). On this level, rhetorical-political rather than theoretical, there is indeed a definitional battle to be had. But then, conflating all liberals into your contingent adversary does not seem smart politics – besides the fact that, in the American contexts, it is anti-liberals, the conservatives, that advance such "arguments".

49. Quentin Skinner, "A Third Concept of Liberty," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 117 (2002).

50. Berlin, "Liberty," 169n (emphasis added).

concerned about the “interference” part, while republicans, or at any rate Pettit and Skinner, about the “arbitrary” addition; but that could well be conceded without touching the fact that there is no relevant theoretical difference between their conceptions of freedom, both being construed in opposition to a “power” that has been collapsed into domination.

If anything, the nuances emphasized by neo-republicans seem to produce an even sharper juxtaposition between power and freedom,<sup>51</sup> thus radicalizing, not challenging, the liberal framework. This makes sense, for of course any power properly so called – possibilities open before an actor in the world – would be to some extent arbitrary, and thus count as domination according to the Pettit’s crisper definition. On the other hand, a power-as-potentiality, actualized into results deemed good by the normative theorist, just as Plato wished,<sup>52</sup> could perhaps eschew the arbitrariness, but by the same token it would not be power in its most proper meaning.

#### 4.1.3. “Liberalism”, or: why would power be against freedom?

We observed the tendency to construe “power” as “power-over” throughout this work, and in the previous section we discussed how “power-over” tends to further slide into “domination”, with both cognates being subject to reification, transforming them, as it were, from subsets of power into opposites to it. We also noted how this conceptual conflation is construed in opposition to freedom. How domination is the opposite of freedom in any particular instance is clear enough, and with a few provisos the same may be understood for the more anodyne “power-over”. It

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51. Pettit, “Freedom as Antipower.”

52. *Supra*, p. 88.

seems less obvious how power in general got to be perceived as the opposite of freedom, given the clear connection between being free and having the power to act.

The horizon of the conflation of power with domination, thence its opposition to freedom, lies within the liberal conceptualization of such matters. By using “liberal”, here I am just reaching for a shorthand which may represent an acceptable compromise between precision and comprehensiveness, without advancing any essentialist claim.<sup>53</sup> The label, thus, does not pretend to exhaust everything that liberalism is or has been, nor is strictly limited to self-appointed liberals (witness neo-republicans in the previous section).

The framework we are discussing being so prevalent, it is no surprise how elements of it may be found in thinkers who are not professed liberals, either because they are explicitly criticizing liberalism, or because they lived before liberalism was even defined as such. The pervasiveness of the elements here discussed could lead to characterize them simply as “modern”, which is one alternative I could have used.<sup>54</sup> This latter label, however, would have been equally difficult to

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53. The difficulties in distilling liberalism into a clear-cut doctrine have been often remarked upon, but see especially: Judith N. Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015). Fawcett defines broad profiles of liberal thinkers and actors, who are individuated by their commitment to the “four loose/guiding ideas” of “conflict, resistance to power, progress, and respect”: Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea*, xv, 10-14. The aversion to power, there outlined from an historical perspective, corresponds quite well to the attitude I am highlighting from a conceptual point of view. This largely is the “liberalism” I am discussing here; whether that is broadly representative or not will have to be the reader’s judgment. On the different strategies historically employed to define and “policing” the meaning of liberalism see: Duncan Bell, “What is Liberalism?,” in *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

54. Another alternative would be to charge the Enlightenment with creating the opposition we are discussing, see e.g.: Jonathan Hearn, “On the social evolution of power to/over,” *Journal of Political Power* 7, no. 2 (2014). This choice is also defensible, but “Enlightenment” is as vague as the other two labels, and again does not include the explicit political focus of “liberalism”.



bound, without the benefit of referring to some general ideological commitments which are relevant for our present discourse.

Liberalism, thus broadly understood, is quite a peculiar family of political doctrines. Its defining trait and *raison d'être* is to shield individuals from excessive interference, so that they, not the State or any other external authority, may decide what to do with their lives.<sup>55</sup> In Rawls' widely influential jargon, no comprehensive doctrine, be it moral, religious, or political, should be imposed; people should be free to choose their conception of the good and live by it, so long as they are reasonable, and recognize the same freedom to others.<sup>56</sup> On this point liberalism is opposed to nearly every other political doctrine across all times. One might expect that, from the denial of a collective determination of the good life, some sort of relativism would follow, equally in contrast with most other political doctrines. However, while some notable liberals have been relativists,<sup>57</sup> contemporary liberal theories are overwhelmingly moralistic.<sup>58</sup>

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55. "The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it": John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 83.

56. John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 (1985); John Rawls, *Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

57. Hans Kelsen, *The Essence and Value of Democracy* (Lanham, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), ch. 10. Richard Rorty could be another example, but in that case the relativism seems to come more from his postmodern than from his liberal commitments. Sometimes, the transition can be observed diachronically, thus John Gray used to be a liberal moralist, but then relativized his own position: John Gray, *Liberalism* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

58. In a sense, this distinction corresponds to the two different interpretations of toleration, either as a moral ideal of the best life or as a pragmatic accommodation to the realities of pluralism: John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

An account of why that is the case would be beyond the scope of this work; but as a broad approximation we may say that the prevailing strands of liberalism have followed Locke's lead in conceptualizing individual liberty as a right (or set thereof) that is at once morally and naturally warranted.<sup>59</sup> While most liberals would no longer defend natural law as a metaphysical proposition,<sup>60</sup> rights are still commonly conceived as if established outside of political power and enforceable against it.<sup>61</sup> Starting from liberty as a foundational moral value,<sup>62</sup> "liberalism has only one overriding aim: to secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of personal freedom."<sup>63</sup> From this we may derive the commonplace conception of political philosophy as applied moral philosophy,<sup>64</sup> which in truth is still opposed by some notable, though quite in the minority, liberals.<sup>65</sup>

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59. John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government* (1689). The inclusion of Locke in the liberal canon may be an artifact of recent times: Bell, "What is Liberalism?," 73 ff. Yet, these are the times we are living through.

60. Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), xi.

61. "Individuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them (without violating their rights). So strong and far-reaching are these rights that they raise the question of what, if anything, the state and its officials may do": Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), ix.

62. Gerald Gaus, and Shane D. Courtland, "Liberalism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, §1.1. The Primacy of Liberty.

63. Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," 21.

64. "Our starting point then, though nonpolitical, is by intention far from nonmoral. Moral philosophy sets the background for, and boundaries of, political philosophy": Nozick, *Anarchy, State, Utopia*, 6. See also: Ronald Dworkin, *Freedom's Law. The Moral Reading of the American Constitution* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

65. E.g. Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2-3, 77. It should be noted that Rawls himself nominally decried the identification of political philosophy with applied morality. The issue, though, is that he meant something different by these labels. Besides Williams' more articulate critique, reading Rawls' own words should clarify how he still thought of political philosophy as a subset of morality: "... justice as fairness is not a comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine—one that applies to all subjects and covers all values. Nor is it to be regarded as the application of such a doctrine to the basic structure of society, as if this structure were merely another subject to which that comprehensive view is to be applied. Neither political philosophy nor justice as fairness is, *in that way*, applied moral

Together with the prevailing understanding of “power” as “power-over”, this moralistic outlook instills an inherently negative quality into the idea of power. This is especially true of the unchecked power that is equated with domination, but any power would run the risk of outstripping its boundaries, or just being applied malevolently. In fact, once the “rights as trumps” have been defined,<sup>66</sup> the normatively relevant effect of any power, public official’s or private citizen’s (the relative weights attributed to either roughly defining the spectrum between the liberal right and left), is either to uphold those rights or to infringe upon them. The former would not be power properly so called, because from this perspective it would be the necessary application of a moral truth established elsewhere; more akin to a potentiality to actualize specific goods than to an unbridled condition of possibility.<sup>67</sup> The latter would instead be unbounded, “arbitrary” just as condemned by neo-republicans, since rights can surely be violated in many different ways, and thus would properly be called power, but it would also be normatively bad by definition. From a liberal point of view, power has to be a deeply suspicious object, perhaps acceptable as a necessary evil in the form of a well ordered government,<sup>68</sup> but never in itself desirable.

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philosophy. [...] Justice as fairness is a political conception of justice for the special case of the basic structure of a modern democratic society. In this respect it is much narrower in scope than comprehensive philosophical moral doctrines [...] It focuses on the political (in the form of the basic structure), *which is but a part of the domain of the moral*.”: John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 14, emphasis added.

66. Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously*.

67. Thus, for example, Rawls’ “two moral powers” are defined as “a capacity for a sense of justice and a capacity for a conception of the good”: Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 19. Now, one can have different conceptions of the good, and arrive at a different judgment about the justice of some practice. Yet, even if we relaxed the claim of having one correct conception of justice, the limits imposed upon the acceptability of a doctrine still makes it so that these “moral powers” are potentialities to achieve a good result (or at any rate one acceptable from Rawls’ point of view), and not powers at someone’s disposal, which could be exercised in unspecified directions.

68. “Society in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil ...”: Thomas Paine,

Even the “milder” instances of power-over – forms of control over people exercised in their own interests – are only *pro tanto* acceptable. Thus, the power of parents or teachers over a child can be justified by the conjunction of a state of minority and the alignment of interests between controlled and controllers. As soon as the child becomes an adult such conditions of power-over are supposed to cease, restoring the default primacy of freedom.<sup>69</sup> In a sense, such a scheme, opposing freedom to control and recognizing normative preference to the former, is typical of liberalism, being amply exploited in the opposition between positive/ancient and negative/modern freedom.<sup>70</sup>

The normative significance of freedom, however, is older and broader, informing the entirety of Western political thought, with the notable exception of its totalitarian degenerations.<sup>71</sup> In different times and contexts, various limits have been accepted regarding who would have been

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*Rights of Man, Common Sense, and Other Political Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

69. Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*, §§ 55, 58, 64-65, 170. More troublingly, this scheme was used as a justification of European domination over “uncivilized” people. Even there, the fig leaf was precisely that this status of dependence was supposedly temporary (in contrast with ancient ideas on natural slavery), in order to allow the dominated people to become civilized, and presumably free. Such a sentiment clearly underlies, for example, Kipling’s notorious *The White Man’s Burden* (1899). John Stuart Mill argued in a similar vein: “Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end”: Mill, *On Liberty*, 81. See also: Karuna Mantena, “Mill and the Imperial Predicament,” in *J.S. Mill’s Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment*, ed. Nadia Urbinati, and Alex Zakaras (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Stephen Holmes, “Making Sense of Liberal Imperialism,” in *J.S. Mill’s Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment*, ed. Nadia Urbinati, and Alex Zakaras (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Duncan Bell, “John Stuart Mill on Colonies,” in *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). Incidentally, the concept of a domination allegedly oriented toward civilization is nothing but a potentiality embedded in a rather crude philosophy of history.

70. The two couplets are often conflated, but it should be noted how, while both Constant’s and Berlin’s were more political than philosophical essays, the former clearly distinguishes the liberty of the ancients from that of the moderns, while the latter conflates various ideas into both the positive and the negative conceptions, neither of which strictly corresponds to Constant’s bipartition. Cf. Benjamin Constant, *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared to that of the Moderns* (1819); Berlin, “Liberty.”

71. Arendt, “What is Freedom?”

eligible for freedom, but the power exercised by some over others has been similarly justified: it is not the case that something else is normatively better than freedom, just that some are naturally slaves,<sup>72</sup> or that their rational-deliberative soul lacks “authority”,<sup>73</sup> and thus it would be in their interest to be directed by their betters – who, alone, would be freedom-worthy.

In fact, even the most brutal domination has not always been construed as incompatible with freedom, as shown by actual historical republicans, who were quite fine with domination over others (slaves, women, defeated enemies, *etc.*) so long as a free public space was maintained for themselves.<sup>74</sup> It was largely the domination of their unfree private subjects that allowed them to be free in public spaces.<sup>75</sup> If there were no contrast between freedom, for some, and the presence of domination, over others, much the less there was a contradiction between power and freedom. The contradiction instead exists, or at the very least is felt and acted upon as if it existed, within liberalism, as we have observed through many examples.

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72. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1259b9-12.

73. *Ibid.*, 1260a13. Here “authority” is a common mistranslation of the Greek κύριος (primarily “mastery”, in the sense of being master over someone or something), but the distinction is presently not crucial.

74. *En passant*, this – the demand for a public space, as opposed to the private quasi-ownership of Kings or Tyrants – is the actual defining trait of republicanism throughout history, covering the many differences between ancient and moderns, radical democrats and aristocratic elitists. There should be a public space free from domination, which is the meaning of *Res publica*, after all. The distinct idea that domination as such is condemnable is far from being shared across the tradition, and largely absent from ancient political thought. Even in modern times, the most conspicuous example of republican ideology, the founding of the United States, was tainted by slavery: Arendt, *On Revolution*, 70-72. This is another way in which the neo-republican commitment to “freedom as non-domination” is much closer to contemporary liberalism than to the historical republican tradition.

75. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, § 5. This is another Arendtean point that has often been interpreted as a factual-historical statement, while it should be understood as expounding a phenomenological condition: *supra*, pp. 72 ff.

The distinctiveness of liberalism, and of the better part of modern political thought, lies not in taking freedom as the normative standard, but rather in two additions to the broadly shared thesis (again, this is not to reduce liberalism to a neat formula, but merely to highlight the elements that are relevant for the present discourse).

First, the assumption of a basic normative equality between human beings,<sup>76</sup> especially in relation to the capacity to determine their own good, greatly increases the demands of freedom. Thus, the bar to justify power over someone is raised, creating the familiar problems with normatively establishing political order, but also fueling liberating struggles in political and social life. The universalization of equality and freedom widens the gap between facts and norms, gifting to modern political thought its characteristic utopian edge. If there are issues with this utopianism, however, they are technical and empirical, in that socio-historical realities may not be pliable to normative demands, or we may have yet to find adequate tools to ply them.<sup>77</sup> All sorts of problems may derive from such an utopian drive, including explosions of violence when reality seems too obstinate; but pragmatical-technical issues they remain, in principle liable to be negotiated, mediated and even solved, however difficult that may be.

Liberalism's second point of distinction is the observed conflation of power with power-over/ domination. By collapsing power into power-over, thus paradoxically locating freedom in the ab-

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76. Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*, §§ 4-5. Dworkin went further, making equality into the defining trait of his liberalism: Ronald Dworkin, "Liberalism," in *Liberalism: Ideas of freedom*, ed. G.W. Smith (London, New York: Routledge, 2002); Ronald Dworkin, *A Matter of Principle* (1985), ch. 9.

77. As a notable proponent of socialism, which on this point is no different from liberalism, put it, "the principal problem that faces the socialist ideal is that we do not know how to design the machinery that would make it run": Gerald A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 57-58.

sence of power, liberal political thought encloses itself in a dichotomy between unrealistic utopianism and realistic resignation, *vis-à-vis* normative requests that are not just hard to realize (as they all, always, are) but rather incoherent, even before considering contingent empirical difficulties. Moreover, this self-inflicted conceptual problem does not appear to have a normative upside. The terms of the impossibly contradictory demands produced by the conflation of “power” with “power-over”, have to be carefully examined.

The impossible normative demand is that of having freedom without power. As “realists” of various stripes have noted,<sup>78</sup> it is never the case that power can be removed from politics, including those very practices aimed at determining and enforcing liberal rights. This common critique, however, mainly refers to a “power-over” instantiated into coercion or inducement; it does not necessarily touch the issue with power as such. Moreover, this line of critique is once again empirical, thus in principle open to be answered through compromises and accommodations.

Our problem, instead, is conceptual: for even if power and freedom are not coextensive, still one cannot be free without also being powerful in a relevant sense. This “relevant sense” varies through different registries, so that to be legally free means having a set of legally recognized powers, while one might argue that being “really” free entails so much more, like the power to govern oneself according to reason, or perhaps access to the resources necessary to make actual use of legal powers. Likewise, being free as an *entrepreneur* is not the same and does not entail the same powers as being free as a partner in a romantic relationship, or as a citizen, an artist, and so

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78. For an overview: William A. Galston, “Realism in political theory,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, no. 4 (2010); Enzo Rossi, and Matt Sleat, “Realism in Normative Political Theory,” *Philosophy Compass* 9, no. 10 (2014).

on and so forth. Nevertheless, within any given semantic context, being free entails having some power, for it would be meaningless to say that I am free to do something that I can not do.<sup>79</sup>

Now, one could reply that the issue is merely terminological. Perhaps liberals, at times, express themselves confusedly, but what they are averse to may be “power-over”, not the more general “power-to”, which is the concept directly implied by freedom. As already noted, logically not every power has to be a power-over:<sup>80</sup> the two are distinct, the latter representing a subset of the former. This could be read as stating that, even if unattainable in reality, the absence of power-over would be at least conceptually possible. That being the case, the conflation of power with power-over could be considered a merely verbal error, because a state of freedom/power without power-over/domination could still work as a normative ideal, as for example in Marx’s dreams of Communism,<sup>81</sup> if not as a feasible political project. Here, though, we have to tread carefully in order to maintain the distinction even while considering the conditional implication between the two concept.

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79. Unless, again, the “free” and the “can” referred to different domains. Much of the disputes around freedom, positive and negative, and its connection with power or actual abilities, are reducible to disagreement about the proper domain for both terms. Thus, in one classic example, the poor are “free” to participate in a free market, even if they practically cannot do it; but that simply means that they are legally free, and in fact their power to do so is legally recognized, even though they do not have the same power, and therefore freedom, from a pragmatic or economical point of view. See also *supra*, p. 186, fn. 31, concerning the possibility of being “neither free nor unfree”.

80. *Supra*, p. 22.

81. “... in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic. *This fixation of social activity*, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce *into an objective power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations*, is one of the chief factors in historical development up till now.”: Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, “The German Ideology,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 160, emphasis added.



Our condition is such that, even while the two concepts are different, any relevant instance of power would practically imply power-over, and therefore violate the moral value of freedom as conceived by liberals. This statement has to be unpacked.

At a first level of approximation, this may just look like the realistic idea that the power to achieve any political goal requires some amount of power over others. There is much common sense in this proposition, and yet it would not take us any closer to the core of our issue. Like any statement of empirical necessity, the need of power over others would be just another case of normative demands being only approximately satisfiable and, like any other such instance, it would indicate a practical-technical problem, not a conceptual one. At the same time, we have already observed how the meaning of power and power-over are distinct, in that the latter is a subset of the former (even though it may become opposite, when objectified or de-personalized). Thus, neither the empirical nor the purely conceptual level of analysis is apt to illuminate the observed tendency to conflate power with power-over.

The appropriate point of view is, once again, that of a “condition” in the Arendtean-phenomenological sense previously discussed.<sup>82</sup> The practical equivalence of power with power-over, resulting in the paradoxical identification of freedom with the absence of power, may be understood neither through contingent empirical facts nor solely through the concepts. It is rather the condition underlying the concept of power, that is to say the presence of a plurality of persons sharing a world of possibilities, that makes power to imply power-over, in a practical sense – that

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82. *Supra*, p. 72

is to say, through the intricate web of our inter-actions – even while the two concepts remain distinct.

The reason is, after all, fairly simple. Any power implies possibilities available (and represented as such) to some person within a world. The world is what is in-between persons, it constitutes the horizon of said persons' actions and powers: one alone with no *infra*, no *inter-est*, no shared language, between himself and others would have no world, no representation of possibilities, and therefore no power. Now, any power would affect the world; obviously when exercised, but also when merely possessed, because the persons' relative positions are themselves relevant in defining the world they share. Since the possibilities available to persons are always at least partly determined by the appearances of their world, affecting the latter implies interfering with the possibilities available to others, which define their freedom, that is to say their power.

Again, this would be in accord with the simpler statement that any power to do something meaningful, on a crowded planet,<sup>83</sup> would imply effects on others. But we have to say something more than that, because our condition of plurality in this world may perhaps be contingent from an ontological point of view, but it is conceptually necessary for power, if “power” is to mean what it means in our languages. It may be the case that there is no “power”, but only “Being”, articulated into potentialities waiting to be actualized, which has been the prevailing metaphysical position ever since Aristotle.<sup>84</sup> But, if the concept of power has any purchase, then our plurality in this

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83. As, for example, in Kant's “unsociable sociability”: Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan aim,” in *Anthropology, History, and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

84. *Supra*, pp. 85 ff.

world makes it practically necessary for any power to imply some form of power-over others. This practical implication is derived from our possible actions within a worldly condition, making it different from contingent facts that can be ascertained empirically, even though it does not erase the conceptual distinction between “power” and “power-over”.

This finally brings us to fully appreciate how the normative aversion for power-over, interference, and dependance, is indeed the distal source for the paradoxical yearning of a powerless freedom. This is banally congruent with common critiques of liberalism, but as far as I know none of those – from *ancien régime* reactionaries to Marxists, from political realism to radical utopianism – has reached the conceptual level,<sup>85</sup> rather remaining closer to factual issues, about anthropology, history, and society, albeit through very different methodologies, from philosophy of history to contemporary social-scientific enquiries. Now, however, we are in the position to see how liberalism’s problem with power is not reducible to divergent empirical judgments, and not even to a different appraisal of the appropriate domains for normative and factual enquiries, being rather derived from a conceptual conflation which is itself made plausible, if surely not justified, by a practical implication of the meaning of power for us in this world.

In the end, the idea of freedom as a fundamental moral/natural condition, rather than as a political creation, makes liberalism – at least in its predominant versions – intrinsically averse to power and, therefore, politics. This is not because it is unrealistic to imagine isolated men in a

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85. Except, that is, in Arendt’s *œuvre*, and even there perhaps not explicitly enough. The liberal framework we are here discussing would in fact be the late consequence of the already mentioned (*supra*, p. 109) relocation of freedom, from politics to the inner realm of the will.

condition of natural freedom; unrealistic that surely is, but in truth no more than many other normative ideals. Regardless of empirics, it is rather the case that the presupposition of a moral freedom-as-non-interference (where the only allowed interferences are justified as means to better approximate the realization of such freedom) is conditionally incompatible with power,<sup>86</sup> motivating the otherwise uncanny opposition between freedom and power we have observed many examples of.

Of course, liberals are seldom perfectly liberal, their theories are not identical to their practices, and the world they inhabit is not entirely shaped by liberal ideas;<sup>87</sup> thus they can and surely do create and exercise power, even while incapable of making normative sense of it. The lack of a viable conceptualization does not always have direct implications on political practices. But it may, especially at critical moments, when political theories have to be re-thought, and the practices based on them accordingly reimagined.

In order to be able to coherently think of politics, it is necessary to dismantle the opposition between power and freedom. To achieve that, it is not sufficient to uncover the distinction between power-to and power-over, and the conceptual primacy of the former. We also have to rec-

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86. The qualification of such possible interference as “arbitrary”, as emphasized by neo-republicans, only makes the point stronger, since a degree of arbitrariness is implied by the concept of power. *Supra*, p. 191.

87. For one prominent example, the political structure of the US republic is characterized on the one hand by the division of powers at multiple levels, and on the other hand by the veneration for untouchable rights (originally conceived mostly against the federal government, then gradually expanded to encompass public and non-public actors). The first corresponds, with modern modifications, to a classical republican trope, and was originally thought “not to limit power but to create more power [...] and prevent any of the multiple power sources from drying up”, and to remedy the impotence of the earlier Confederacy: Arendt, *On Revolution*, 152-54. The latter, being inspired by conceptions of natural law, corresponds instead to the typical liberal reading of power as a danger to be contained. Both elements are still present and relevant, but the former has been largely overshadowed, and it is in fact routinely interpreted in the latter’s light, that is to say as just another mechanism to limit public power over private people.

ognize how our condition of plurality implies that any power, that is to say anyone's freedom, cannot but imply some form of power-over others. This rules out the application of a transcendent model of freedom to political matters, leaving us with the basic issue of how to realize the conditions for power without at once engendering domination.

For this task, the clarification of the concept of power is but a necessary premise. Before saying something more about this task, in our last chapter, we have first to dispel another, largely opposite, way of making "power" disappear into an oriented potentiality.

## 4.2. Normative powers in Critical Theory

In the previous section we observed how the position of freedom as a moral value results in the construal of power as an intrinsically negative concept. We have focused on liberalism and its conceptions of freedom because they happen to be most conspicuous in our current political conditions. Nevertheless, the most basic issue is not with "freedom" *per se*, but rather with the position of any value, indeed any end in whatever form, as a foundation for politics.

If, for example, the value were "social harmony" or "justice" or "love of God", we would all the same observe that any "power" could be normatively good only if it resulted in the actualization of the given value/end – and then it would not be power properly so called but rather an oriented potentiality – while any differently actualized power would be bad by definition.<sup>88</sup> The issue is heightened into a paradox by the peculiar content of liberalism, producing the yearning for a

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88. *Supra*, p. 195.

powerless freedom, but the negative connotation of any power not bound to specific actualizations would result from any value-based doctrine.

Many political philosophies have proceeded by positing foundational values, from Plato's and Aristotle's accounts of the good life, to the diverse religious and theological views that dominated Western thought through the Middle Ages and beyond.<sup>89</sup> In this respect, the moralistic strands of liberalism are formally no different: the content of the values shifted, but the normative structure stayed the same. All such value-based doctrines would find reasons to either reduce power to an oriented potentiality,<sup>90</sup> or evaluate it negatively for its unruly arbitrariness. The usual alternative to value-based doctrines is supplied by "realistic" positions, which strip "power" of normative connotations altogether, reducing it to a form of causality (which also tends to erase power, as we observed) to be employed in order to reach whatever goal the actors may have,<sup>91</sup> regardless of the latter's normative value. A further, less common, solution to the tension between normativity and power would be to assign a positive normative value to the latter. This completes the three possibilities within the spectrum of teleological outlooks: either power would be normatively bad, neutral, or good.

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89. In historical terms, this proposition is imprecise, since "value" is a relatively recent concept, which emerged precisely when earlier absolutes, such as God, the good life, *etc.*, had lost much of their purchase. Here we shall gloss over the difference, however important, between modern "values" and the older normative hypostases they replaced.

90. As with Plato's reduction of *dynamis* to a potential oriented toward the good: *supra*, pp. 86-88.

91. Except that they could not coherently conceive them as having any end, because power is "...the very condition enabling a group of people to think and act in terms of the means-end category": *supra*, p. 56; Arendt, *On Violence*, 51.

The attribution of a positive normative value to an idea of “power” needs to be embedded within a relatively complex “diagnoses of the times”.<sup>92</sup> Lacking that, the alternative would be to declare that whatever came from someone’s power is good and just – *i.e.* the most brutal assertion that “might makes right” – which is implausible on its face. The classical form of such a “diagnostic” approach would be a philosophy of history – as inaugurated by Augustine to ground his theodicy, made immanent by Hegel to reconcile the apparent contingency of freedom with the necessity of reason, and then materialistically reshaped into a logic of the development of productive forces by Marx. These views of history as the actualization of a potentiality (as well as many less refined versions) are still present in the background of our political culture, but they are not commonly held as valid philosophical positions anymore.

Nevertheless, the heritage of Hegelian-Marxist philosophies of history lives on, through complex transformations and adjustments, in contemporary Critical Theory. The early Frankfurt School maintained, if not by name, the framework of an oriented potentiality being actualized through history; but rather than depicting the progressive march of human reason, they painted the inverted image of the inescapability of a domination embedded into Western thought and praxis since their very beginnings.<sup>93</sup> The result, according to Habermas, would then be that:

In cultural modernity, reason gets definitively stripped of its validity claim and assimilated to sheer power. The critical capacity to take up a “Yes” or “No” stance and to distinguish between valid and invalid propositions is *undermined* as power and validity claims enter into a turbid

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92. *Supra*, p. 172.

93. Max Horkheimer, and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

fusion.<sup>94</sup>

The implied reduction of power to domination remained common within Critical Theory,<sup>95</sup> which in this respect would not differ from other approaches observed throughout this work. Perceiving the negative orientation of his predecessors as a burden for a Critical Theory that still wanted to be emancipatory and progressive, Habermas found a more “positively” oriented power through a sociological reinterpretation of Arendt’s “communicative power”.<sup>96</sup> More recently, Rainer Forst reclaimed a connection between power and normativity on a more philosophical/conceptual level of analysis.<sup>97</sup>

Both attempts to disentangle the “turbid fusion” between power and validity respond to Critical Theory’s root commitment to reconcile facts and norms. They try to do so, in different ways, by challenging the picture of a “power” collapsed onto facticity, which nevertheless problematically remains their starting point. Both philosophers are well justified in seeking to overcome the trite opposition between power and normativity, for the simple reason that it makes no sense to apply any kind of “ought-statement” to subject and objects that are not in a condition of possibility.

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94. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1987), 112. I am here following Habermas’ account, though different readings are certainly possible, because it has been most influential in informing the subsequent development of Critical Theory.

95. E.g. Honneth, *The Critique of Power*.

96. Habermas, “Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power.”

97. Forst, *Normativity and Power*.



In this sense, Habermas' and Forst's discourses around power are less paradoxical than the reduction of power to an inherently negative concept we observed in the previous section. However, neither attempt to connect power with normativity succeeds, largely because of their inadequate understanding of the meaning of power, as we shall now see in some more detail.

#### 4.2.1. Habermas' communicative power

The prominence of Jürgen Habermas during the last four decades has been predicated on his unparalleled efforts to ground normativity in epistemological, social, and political domains. Habermas has shown an unrelenting commitment to mediation and synthesis between different, even opposite, approaches. Concerning politics, this has meant trying to reconcile empirical insights from sociology and political science with normative theory, which itself includes socialist, liberal, republican, and radical democratic elements. Within this complex attempt, most extensively developed in *Between Facts and Norms*,<sup>98</sup> the notion of “communicative power” – lifted from Arendt through a “creative misreading”<sup>99</sup> – played a crucial role, alongside its counterpart “administrative power”. These two concepts into which “political power” is differentiated,<sup>100</sup> at a high level of abstraction, would explain the entire dynamics of modern democratic societies.

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98. Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996). A good synthesis of the theoretical developments through Habermas' works may be found in: Hugh Baxter, *Habermas: The Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

99. Habermas, “Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power”; Margaret Canovan, “A Case of Distorted Communication: A Note on Habermas and Arendt,” *Political Theory* 11, no. 1 (1983); Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 147-50.

100. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 136.

With considerable simplification, the main point is that the “administrative power”, employed by the State to fulfill its function of integrating the different “sub-systems” society is composed of,<sup>101</sup> cannot be reproduced and thus perpetuated except than by channeling, through the medium of law,<sup>102</sup> the “communicative power”, created by free discursive interactions.<sup>103</sup> The normatively oriented “communicative power” would reconcile the grim realities of politics – grim indeed because, following previous Frankfurt philosophers, administrative power is largely identified with the constraining aspects of rationalization – with a space for emancipation and moral progress.

Here we should note that, while Habermas explicitly condemns philosophies of history,<sup>104</sup> communicative power does not define a space of indeterminate possibilities, as opposed to the stringent logic of administration. To the contrary, necessity is the category governing both types of power, as well as their interrelation. Communicative power is necessary to create and legitimize administrative power, and administrative power is necessary to translate the instances emerging from communication into the universally understandable (because backed by coercion) medium of law. According to this scheme, both powers have their own logic – communication and under-

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101. Habermas’ theory of society is considerably indebted to systems theory, in both its American and German variants, see for example: Parsons, *The Social System*; Niklas Luhmann, *Introduction to Systems Theory* (2012).

102. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 150, 299.

103. *Ibid.*, 147-48.

104. “A reconstructive sociology of democracy must therefore choose its basic concepts in such a way that it can identify particles and fragments of an “existing reason” already incorporated in political practices, however distorted these may be. This approach does not need a philosophy of history to support it.” *Ibid.*, 287. See also *Ibid.*, 2-3, 57, 489.

standing vs. instrumentality and coercion – and in a modern society neither would function without the other, both being enmeshed in a structurally mutual necessity.

In keeping with Habermas' synthetic attitude, the reciprocal necessity of communicative and administrative power is understood both normatively, with reference to the internal logic of democratic law,<sup>105</sup> and factually, through the conditions claimed to be empirically necessary for a modern society to function.<sup>106</sup> From both perspectives, communicative power would fulfill the task of producing the "power" that could then be administratively employed.

We should pause here and note how the preceding statement is conceptually problematic, even independently from the question of its validity as a description of how modern society works. We are saying that a power, qualified in a certain way (communicative), produces a second power, without qualification, which is then employed by a third (yet differently qualified) power; the mere formality of this relation should lead us to suspect that the concept referred to by the word "power" cannot be the same in the three instances, leaving unclear what "power" – between the idiosyncratic receptions of Arendt's notion of power and of systems theory's sociology – truly means within Habermas' theory.

Concerning communicative power, Habermas claimed to be developing a basic Arendtean insight, which he interpreted as the assertion that legitimate power can only be created through non-instrumental communicative interactions, coherently with his theory of the rational poten-

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105. *Ibid.*, §§ 4.1, 4.2.

106. *Ibid.*, chs. 7-8.

tial of the lifeworld.<sup>107</sup> According to Habermas, Arendt held a idealized conception of power, which would have made her blind to the strategic, instrumental, and ideological aspects of modern politics.<sup>108</sup> In other words, she would have been right in individuating the role of free communication in creating power; wrong in neglecting the necessary existence of administrative/systemic power. Habermas, thus, would be correcting the alleged unilateral quality of Arendt's "power" by integrating it as one part of the dyadic explanation of modern democratic society.

However, the problems attributed to Arendt largely exist only for Habermas' own peculiar interpretation of communicative power. We have seen how power, far from being simply construed in contrast to instrumentality, is understood by Arendt as the very condition of acting purposively.<sup>109</sup> We should also note how that is independent from the normative quality of the purpose, therein including quite un-communicative, morally opprobrious, collective endeavors, such as the domination of masters over slaves.<sup>110</sup> Whatever one may think about such a notion of power, accusing it to be innocent to the unsavory aspects of politics is implausible on its face.

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107. Expounded at length in his *magnum opus*: Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1; Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2.

108. Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power," 14 ff.

109. Cf. *Ibid.*, 6. *Supra*, p. 56. We should thus avoid to overstate the opposition of Arendt to "the teleological model of action": Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, 42. The point is rather that, in order to maintain our condition of being able to act purposively, we have also to be able to respect the rather un-purposive boundaries (conceptual and pragmatic) of action and power. In other words, the problem might not be the common image of man as purposive, but rather simply that such purposiveness has been thought as natural, metaphysical, anthropological, rather than phenomenologically conditional.

110. Arendt, *On Violence*, 50. The example of lying is also relevant: Hannah Arendt, "Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers," in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972); David Luban, "on habermas on arendt on power," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 6, no. 1 (1979), 88. Another potential negative aspect of power is that, under egalitarian conditions, it can destroy the strength of individuals: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 203.

It was likewise strange to accuse Arendt of being oblivious to ideological distortions, not only because ideology had a prominent place in her treatment of totalitarianism,<sup>111</sup> but also because her understanding of power, given its categorial quality and the explicit link with the “space of appearances”,<sup>112</sup> is open to a thematization of public opinion’s organized distortion – more so, indeed, than Habermas’ own theory, where civil society is supposed to play a substantial normative role, leaving open the question of what happens to our democratic commitments when civil society happens to be “bad”.<sup>113</sup>

In other words, the problems of Arendt’s “power” – which according to Habermas would reveal the need to integrate it with the empirical description provided by sociology and political science – are issues only for Habermas’ interpretation of it as a social phenomenon, endowed with a *telos* toward normative understanding. He must hold to this problematic interpretation in deference to the overarching goal of reconciling normativity and facticity. Not surprisingly, a goal-oriented construction of concepts produces, once again, some distortions.

Nevertheless, if Habermas’ dualist conception of power were successful on its own terms, one could excuse its hermeneutical problems and still adopt it as a viable framework. There are reasons, however, to question the very possibility of achieving such success. Besides taking issue with

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111. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, , ch. 13. In other words, “such a charge must appear patently absurd, for seldom has any political thinker been as sensitive to the twists and turns of ideology, or as relentlessly hostile to its assault on the factual”: Luban, “on habermas on arendt on power,” 84.

112. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, § 28. The reflections on politics and lying are also relevant in this context: Arendt, “Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers.”

113. Simone Chambers, and Jeffrey Kopstein, “Bad Civil Society,” *Political Theory* 29, no. 6 (2001).

the substantive results of Habermas' project – a very contested ground which we are not able to assess here<sup>114</sup> – the main problem is the lack of any recognizable concept of power. That is to say, once an otherwise undefined “political power” has been split into “administrative” and “communicative”, it is not at all clear why the two should bear the same name, given that they have hardly anything in common – except for the fact that both are conceived as oriented potentialities, and not as proper powers.<sup>115</sup> Following this logic, the implication is that there is no “power” (properly so called) to be found in Habermas' theory.

Habermas two “powers” are internally problematic even when separately considered. “Communicative power” neither corresponds to nor subsumes the ordinary meaning of power, which would leave the justification for its use to its internal theoretical validity. From this perspective, while the alleged tendency toward just and rational results may or may not be ascertained empirically, the problem is that it cannot, within Habermas' own discursive framework, coherently be employed as a normative ground.

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114. For a first orientation within the copious literature see: Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1978); John B. Thompson, and David Held, *Habermas: Critical Debates* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1982); Kenneth Baynes, *The Normative Grounds of Social Criticism: Kant, Rawls, and Habermas* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1992); Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves, and Seyla Benhabib, eds. *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1997); Michel Rosenfeld, and Andrew Arato, eds. *Habermas on Law and Democracy: Critical Exchanges* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Lewis Edwin Hahn, ed. *Perspectives on Habermas* (Chicago: Open Court, 2000); David Ingram, *Habermas: Introduction and Analysis* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); Baxter, *Habermas: The Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*; Kenneth Baynes, *Habermas* (London, New York: Routledge, 2015).

115. Indeed, Habermas revealingly wrote that both sides of power, then equated with Weber's and Arendt's respective conceptualizations, “represent power as a potency [*Potenz*] that is actualized [*aktualisiert*] in actions”: Habermas, “Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power,” 3.

This can be understood through Karl-Otto Apel's internal critique of Habermas' project.<sup>116</sup> The gist of Apel's critique is an elaborated version of the naturalistic fallacy: one cannot use any empirical observation to ground normativity as such, because any empirical knowledge we may acquire depends on a communicative practice which must already have established its own validity (as we no longer believe in any idealized external standpoint). Thus, even if it were empirically true that the communicative generation of power, being rooted in civil society/lifeworld, would tend to produce good and rational results, that could still not be used to justify any normative commitment to the "two-track" deliberative politics advocated by Habermas.<sup>117</sup>

The only way to make good of the normative role ascribed to communicative power would be to attribute to it a *telos* toward rationality that is both factual (*i.e.* not transcendental or merely normative) and established with theoretical certainty (*i.e.* beyond the vagaries of empirical observations). But such an escape route would be incompatible with Habermas' avowedly "post-metaphysical" stance.<sup>118</sup> According to Apel, this would be the "somewhat unacknowledged or unrecognized relic of the speculative philosophy of history",<sup>119</sup> hiding under the fallacious attribution of normative value to alleged empirical tendencies. Arendt did not live long enough to see the devel-

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116. Karl-Otto Apel, "Normatively Grounding "Critical Theory" through a Recourse to the Lifeworld? A Transcendental-Pragmatic Attempt to Think with Habermas against Habermas," in *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, ed. Axel Honneth, *et al.* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1992); Karl-Otto Apel, "Auflösung der Diskursethik? Zur Architektonik der Diskursdifferenzierung in Habermas' Faktizität und Geltung," in *Auseinandersetzungen. Erprobung des transzendentalpragmatischen Ansatzes* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998).

117. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 304 ff.

118. Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1992).

119. Apel, "Normatively Grounding "Critical Theory" through a Recourse to the Lifeworld?," 131.

opment of Habermas' mature thinking,<sup>120</sup> but it seems likely that she would have agreed with Apel's Kantian critique, given her critical stance toward metaphysics,<sup>121</sup> her disdain for philosophies of history, and for "developmental" logics in general.

The case about "administrative power" is simpler for us, as Habermas there adopted the point of view of sociology and political science, largely accepting their descriptions of observable instances of power, whose only significant defect would be their blindness to the normative side represented by communicative power. The non-insignificant issue, here, is that the sociologists and political scientists from whom Habermas drew the "empirical" side of his theory did not themselves possessed any viable definition of "power", as we examined at length in our first chapter,<sup>122</sup> and by consequence neither does Habermas.

In employing "administrative power" as corresponding to the concept of power that is common in the social sciences, Habermas considered both structuralist/systemic and "action-theoretical" approaches. Here we should note that while action-theoretical approaches (conceiving of power as exercised by someone over someone else) may still be about a subset of power, even though they cannot formulate a viable definition, the systemic perspective rather excludes any

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120. Within Arendt's work, as far as I know, there is a single reference to the then young Habermas. In light of later developments, the note is interestingly appreciative and dismissive at once, making him an example of the difficulty of breaking free from "outworn [Marxist] theories and slogans" Arendt, *On Violence*, 96-97.

121. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Thinking, 212.

122. To the long string of circular definitions of power, we may here add the one Habermas drew from Parsons as "the general capacity of a social system to get things done in the interest of collective goals", which of course is nothing but "the general power of a social system to get things done...": Parsons, *Structure and Process in Modern Societies*, 181; Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power," 5. See also: Talcott Parsons, "On the Concept of Political Power," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 107, no. 3 (1963).



power properly so called,<sup>123</sup> by reducing interactions to functional social necessities. On balance, the latter is the perspective Habermas most relies on in his social theory, and this lead him even farther away from a coherent understanding of power.

Habermas took Arendt's "power" to coincide with the "generation" – itself normatively oriented to mutual understanding – of a power that would then be employed purposively/instrumentally, on the model of strategic action. In so doing, he may seem to remain close to Arendt's thinking, which explicitly presents power as a necessary condition for maintaining political order and acting purposively in general. However, by neglecting to consider the shift of type effected by Arendt – "power" defines a condition, not an object – Habermas fell back on the usual discussions of power, conceptualized as a "thing" to be had and used (a "media" in systems theory's jargon), which, despite their familiarity, are unable to capture the meaning of the term as ordinary employed in our languages.

This leaves Habermas' theory bereft of a proper concept for power, reproducing the age-old reduction of it to some form of oriented potentiality. We have "communicative power" to fill in the role of an avowedly renounced philosophy of history. This may or may not be plausible as an empirical/philosophical claim – arguably it is not, as per Apel's critique – but even if it were perfectly correct as such, it still would not correspond to the idea of power, but rather to a potentiality with a given direction of actualization. "Administrative power", on the other hand, represents

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123. Niklas Luhmann, a privileged reference point for Habermas, did explicitly question the relevance of "power" as such: Niklas Luhmann, *Trust and Power. Two works by Niklas Luhmann* (Edison NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 1982), 107.

the overall set of causative forces at the disposal of a government (thanks to the citizens' overall compliance, ultimately reducible to the legitimizing effect of communicative power), which can themselves be observed from a "system-theoretical" (sociology) or an "action-theoretical" (political science) perspective. Coherently with Habermas' reliance on existing conceptions of power – which we have already observed to be fallacious – neither "power" would denote a modality of possibility, and thus could be no power properly so called.

Again, it is possible to imagine an empirical (perhaps unwittingly metaphysical) "diagnose of the times" which correctly describe modern society with no need to employ "power"; but it would certainly represents a stark detachment from both politics and ordinary language. An especially troublesome detachment here, given Habermas' overall philosophical commitments, starting from the position of a subject with the capacity, which is to say the power, to freely respond "yes or no" to illocutionary linguistic acts.<sup>124</sup>

In other words, performing yet another swapping of potentiality in lieu of power is not merely a dubious move, which could be criticized on both empirical and philosophical grounds; it also removes the concept needed to make sense of the theory's own foundation in the pragmatics of ordinary language,<sup>125</sup> from the first-person perspective of an actor empowered to freely respond to validity claims that happens to be constantly, yet always contingently, raised by others. It is, in fact, true that there is a connection between power and this "space of reasons" – even if not exact-

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124. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 119-120, 147, 324; Stephen K. White, and Evan Robert Farr, "'No-Saying' in Habermas," *Political Theory* 40, no. 1 (2012).

125. Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Communication*.

ly in the way claimed by Forst, as we will see in the next section. The troubling implication is that, absent a clear understanding of power, reason itself might be lost.

#### 4.2.2. Forst's noumenal power

After a couple of decades of relative neglect (amongst critical theorists) for the concept of power, Rainer Forst recently brought the power-normativity nexus back to the foreground. Forst recognizes the need for a “de-reified” concept of power,<sup>126</sup> and correctly affirms how, while connected to a space of reasons/justifications, “the concept of power is neither positively nor negatively charged, but is instead neutral.”<sup>127</sup> In this sense, Forst takes a healthy step back from the teleologic sociology employed by Habermas. Forst does not, however, pursue this path to its end, partly because he wants to use “power” functionally to a normative theory, and partly because he still relies on those circular definitions which, as we have observed, obscure the connection between power and the category of possibility.

Forst contends that “we only understand what power is and how it is exercised once we understand its essentially *noumenal* nature”;<sup>128</sup> by which he means that power is to be found in the “space of reasons”,<sup>129</sup> so that when we refer to power we are inherently evoking the normative dimension of the reasons given to free subjects. This would not impinge on the avowed neutrality of this conception of power, since the motivating reasons are not themselves qualified, they could

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126. Forst, *Normativity and Power*, 10.

127. *Ibid.*, 10, 38.

128. *Ibid.*, 37.

129. *Ibid.*, 38; Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 76.

be bad or good reasons (including even threats); but according to Forst we can properly speak of “power” only when there are reasons being given and received by agents and subjects. This, to be clear, is intended by the author as a general account of power (as opposed, for example, to instances of sheer physical coercion or violence), not as merely a facet or form of it.

Highlighting how power cannot be reduced to a factual dimension is an important step in the right direction. However, from the perspective of conceptual understanding, Forst has three significant problems. The first is simply that his central notion of “noumenal power” is not sufficiently clarified, to the point that the author himself at times seems to dither about defining it as such.<sup>130</sup> The second issue is that, when “power” is explicitly spelled-out, Forst appears to fall back on conventional definitions based on “ability” or “capacity”,<sup>131</sup> which we have already observed to be circular. Incidentally, these definitions run against the avowed de-reification of the concept, and bely the intent of defining power in general, rather than just specific subsets of it. Lastly, even if “power” is presented as normatively neutral, there is a residual teleological orientation in its being purposefully constructed to fit within a critical theory of social justification. This makes

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130. Forst, *Normativity and Power*, 38. At times, Forst shows a taste for the paradoxical, as when telling us that: “the phenomenon of power is noumenal in nature”: *Ibid.*, 42, *emphasis added*.

131. E.g. “Power should be understood in processual terms as the ability to determine, or if necessary even to close off (or also to open up), the space of reasons...”, or “power must be understood as essentially a mental phenomenon, as the capacity to bring others to think and do things that they would not otherwise have thought or done”, “Let us begin by defining power as the capacity of A to motivate B to think or do something that B would otherwise not have thought or done”, “We call power generally the capacity of A to influence the space of reasons for B and/or C...”, and “power is the capacity to bind”: *Ibid.*, 10, 34, 40, 49, 65. All these amount to say, once again, that “power is... the power to...”

Forst's notion of power more of a "conception", even if a relatively parsimonious one, than a "concept",<sup>132</sup> introducing some problematic distance from the ordinary meaning of the term.

Compared to Habermas', Forst's recent engagement with power is both more explicit and relatively self-contained, we can thus follow it more closely. We can observe how the aim of using the concept of "power" as a cog in the machinery of a comprehensive critical theory interferes with a precise understanding of its meaning, starting with the very introduction of the argument:

To adapt this [Wilfred Sellars's] insight to my purposes, I suggest that the essential point about power is that, in characterizing a situation as an exercise of power, we do not merely give an empirical description of a state of affairs or a social relation; we also, and primarily, have to place it in the space of reasons, or the normative space of freedom and action. [...] To be a subject of power is to be moved by reasons that others have given me and that motivate me to think or act in a certain way intended by the reason-giver.<sup>133</sup>

Now the first part of this statement is entirely correct: as we have argued at some length, the concept of power individuates a domain that cannot be reduced to empirical descriptions, because it is about what may or may not be, and has to be represented to/by persons to boot, not about what simply is or is not. However, there is quite a leap from that to the following assertion that power has to be placed "in the space of reasons", and the *segue* into saying that being subject to power implies being moved by reasons is wholly unwarranted.

Interestingly, it is once again Arendt being mobilized to support a "positive" (even if now ostensibly more "neutral") reading of power, *vis-à-vis* its common reduction to the "negative" con-

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132. *Supra*, pp. vi ff., 6 ff.

133. *Ibid.*, 38.

cept of domination by political scientists and philosophers. The use of Arendt is framed by another “insightful-but-partial” evaluation, similar to the one given by Habermas:

Approaches which focus on the exercise of power as an imposition of will, or as constraining others by external or internal means, often have equally one-sided positive counterparts that focus on communicative forms of power. An example is Hannah Arendt’s conception of power as “acting in concert,” as being based on free and equal consent, and hence as different from violence or force. Arendt’s insights are important, but the conceptual contrast she draws is too stark; we should reserve the concept of power neither for a negative nor for a purely positive phenomenon.<sup>134</sup>

And once again, the critique would be better directed at Forst himself, given that in Arendt there is nothing supporting the interpretation of power as a purely positive phenomenon, as we saw. The specific insight on which Forst draws attention, however, is in itself interesting to better understand the relation between power and violence (or physical coercion), and the specific way in which they are opposite to each other (*i.e.* from a phenomenological/conditional point of view, not empirically). Forst uses Arendt’s assertions such as “rule by sheer violence comes into play where power is being lost,”<sup>135</sup> to buttress his claim that power implies reason-giving. While the analyses inspired by such insight are perspicuous – it seems true that the recourse to violence tends to happen when a government has lost much of its power – they do not establish the necessary congruence of power with reason-giving.

It is plain, in fact, that I (and a government as well) have powers, both in general and over others, that do not involve reason – not even in Forst’s broadly neutral sense, in which “bad” reasons,

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134. *Ibid.*, 39-40.

135. Arendt, *On Violence*, 53; Forst, *Normativity and Power*, 41, 50.

such as a threat at gunpoint, still count as reasons. Even in cases where I *can* use violence, in the sense that I have the physical means and represent the possibility of using them, then by definition that amounts to the power of employing (or not employing) violence. And if said violence is used against someone, the power may also be a power to force them to do something. These are instances of power, even if they have no “noumenal” character in Forst’s sense.<sup>136</sup>

This, however, does not detach power from language since, for the use of violence to be in my power, I must be able to represent the possibilities involved in using or not using said violence, and such representational endeavor requires language. Language also implies a plurality of speakers, even if the sufferer of the violence in question is not taken as a speaker nor as an addressee of speech in the given moment. Were I unable to represent possibilities, the violence could only be necessitated from my point of view – some form of instinctive response perhaps, or even a calculated reaction to a threat to my life and limbs – and therefore not in my power.

The intuition that power is connected with a linguistic space is thus correct and, since the representation of possibilities is by definition irreducible to sheer *empiria*, the “noumenal” label may aptly be used to signify just that. But the jump from this recognition to an intrinsic connection between power and reason-giving is impermissible, and likely a result of the lack of clarity in the underlying conceptual understanding.

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136. Searle explained the point quite well: “A common way, *but not the only way*, to exercise power is to give people reasons for actions that they would not otherwise have. An order given by someone in a position of authority, for example, is such a reason. And threats of violence create prudential reasons. The source of the power, in the case of the threat, is the potential violence, but not all sources of power are based on the possibility or threat of violence, as we will see.” Searle, *Making the Social World*, 146, emphasis added.

The ordinary meaning of power, so that the power of using violence is certainly a power, can be reconciled with the conditional opposition between power and violence if we understand how the former relates to possibility and the latter to necessity. The reason why examples of physical coercion, especially extreme examples, may not constitute instances of power is not the lack of justificatory reasons. What is relevant is rather that violent interactions happens in the modality of necessity.

Thus, the moment we are locked in a physical confrontation we lose a significant portion of our available possibilities, and more so the more intense the struggle is, to the point that in a literal fight for survival we cannot do anything but actualize whatever means we have to the end of destroying our adversary (or die trying). Truly, “sheer violence is mute”,<sup>137</sup> and power relies on language for opening up a space of possibilities; but the implication is not that power necessarily has to do with reasons – nor that violence necessarily does not, as incidentally well shown by Forst’s analysis.<sup>138</sup> Rather, the quite more trivial point is that when violence *completely* replaces power, then there is no power left indeed.

This may happen not just when the logic of a struggle for survival asserts itself, but also when a government is left with no option other than give up control or physically destroying its unruly subjects – as, according to Arendt, happened in instances of decolonization.<sup>139</sup> None of this, how-

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137. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 26.

138. In which the threat of violence may count as a “reason” to act, even if not a “good” reason: Forst, *Normativity and Power*, 40-41.

139. Arendt, *On Violence*, 53-54. See also: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 201.



ever, erases the simple observation that, in less extreme situations, power and violence often go together,<sup>140</sup> and thus there clearly are instances of power that are not “noumenal” in Forst’s sense.

As we have already noted and will better see in the last chapter, there is still a link between power and normativity, in that both are connected to our capacity for linguistic representations, but this is less than what Forst would need to make his allegedly descriptive concept of power into a premise for a critical theory, now based on his conception of the justificatory space of reasons. The observed problems in the descriptive validity of Forst’s “noumenal power” are due to its being constructed in order to function as part of an overall theory, rather than to reflect the ordinary meaning of the concept.

Arguably, Habermas smuggled a normative teleology into his sociological descriptions, in order to sustain his theory of society without explicit recourse to abstract normative assumptions. Forst performs a similar feat, albeit in a significantly more restrained manner, at the level of conceptual definitions. He does not attempt to insert a normative *telos* into a sociological description of the process for the creation and reproduction of power, but rather he just posits a conceptual connection between “power” and “justification” as such. Even this, however, is too much of a “teleologization”, or “potentialization”, of power, and cannot be sustained as a valid definition *vis-à-vis* the ordinary meaning of the concept.

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140. “Power and violence, though they are distinct phenomena, usually appear together”: Arendt, *On Violence*, 52. The level of distortion suffered by Arendt’s remarkably clear treatment of these concepts is astounding.

Whilst power is a logical condition for normative discourses to make sense, the connection with justification sought by Forst is exceedingly direct. We should rather go a step further in abstraction, to the link with representative language as such, to properly understand the relation between the ordinary concept of power and normativity, and consequently justice and justification. The connection lies not in Forst's "space of reasons", but rather more modestly, as a pure condition of possibility, in the presence of a space of appearances.

## 5. Power and the space of appearances

Before proceeding, it may be advisable to present a brief summary of the results reached so far. This is not just an aid to memory, given the rather lengthy way we've gone through, but also an attempt to bring back to a shared language what has until now been discussed (insofar as possible) from a point of view internal to the positions examined and criticized. This last chapter, indeed, may be read as an attempt to demonstrate performatively the coherence of elements drawn from diverse political discourses, once they are observed from the perspective of a proper understanding of power – we are moving, as it were, from analysis to synthesis.

We began by observing how most attempts to define “power” floundered on their circularity, with the only significant alternative being definitions so far detached from ordinary language that “power” ended up denoting a pseudo-object, the most conspicuous character of which was to exclude that anyone involved could have power in the ordinary sense. These two ways of misdefining our concept are *prima facie* unconnected or even opposite, but we may now see how, at a

sufficiently high level of abstraction, they are both derived from the root confusion between power-as-possibility (open before a person in the world) and power-as-potentiality (with a determined end, or set thereof). Either the lack of distinction, or the swapping of one concept for the other, result in the incapacity to conceptualize power properly so called.

It bears repeating here how this oft-evoked “propriety” is meant to be purely linguistic, not metaphysical or in any way essentialist. What we are claiming is that it makes more sense for us, if we want to understand each other, to differentiate between meanings, and to denote one of them as the most proper. What we are, emphatically, not saying is that there exists somewhere an essence of “power” individuating two (or more) ontologically distinct realities.

Such linguistic propriety is individuated by three main considerations. First, logically, if two concepts have different meanings they are, just for that, different concepts, and we should be able to discern between them, even when denoted by the same word. Secondly, semantically, the concept of potentiality is more complex than power-as-possibility, for it includes the idea of a defined end (or set thereof) that the latter lacks – the philosophical meaning of potentiality, in fact, was introduced quite explicitly to “remedy” this lacking, which was problematic to Plato and Aristotle for both metaphysical and political reasons.<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, pragmatically, while we might and do use the same word to refer to both power-as-potentiality and power-as-possibility, we have observed

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1. This is, indeed, another facet of the Platonic attempt to expel from his philosophy the unpredictability of politics, of which the reduction of action to the model of work is the most conspicuous, but not the only, element, see: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 19-20, 142-143, 185-186, 222-227, 302-304.

how this conflation easily led to misunderstandings, which would better be avoided by maintaining a careful distinction.

Thus, while we are certainly not in the position to “correct” the ordinary English usage, where “power” is used for both meanings (and various additional sub-meanings, as we saw throughout this work), it still makes sense to differentiate between power properly so called and power-as-potentiality, as a concept that is logically, philosophically, and historically posterior to the original use of power/*dynamis* as denoting a condition of possibility. This consideration is reinforced by the comparison with other languages, such as French or Italian, that maintain a morphologic distinction between *pouvoir/potere* and *puissance/potenza*.

Once clarified, this distinction becomes available to disentangle perplexities within empirical and normative political discourses. In the context of specialistic definitional debates, this may be the most relevant point here made, since even the most advanced attempts to define power only got to the point of asserting its equivalence with potentiality,<sup>2</sup> which is instead the root of present misunderstandings. Disentangling this conflation would have very broad implications, both philosophical and political, but within the boundaries of this work we mostly limited our discussion to two disciplinary domains. Thus, in the third and fourth chapter we were able to observe how the inconsistencies, sometimes absurdities, encountered by political science and philosophy in their dealings with “power” may be traced back to the oft-forgotten conflation with potentiality, which leads to erase the dimension of open possibilities, and thus power.

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2. *Supra*, pp. 34-34, 88n.

Contemporary political science is largely informed by the categories of causality and probability, which in different ways are subsets of, or variations on, the idea of a teleologically oriented potentiality. Causality and probability, thus, are connected to necessity – both implying the idea of a necessary sequence – and this is why a science based on those categories has a tendency to expel power from its framework. The different enterprise of political philosophy/theory ends up in an analogous place by variously assuming a normative orientation as its starting point, so that power is reduced to a potentiality pulling toward, or away from, said normativity, as we have examined chiefly through the examples of Liberalism and Critical Theory. Both political science and philosophy, by expelling the space of possibility from their conceptual framework, are effectively unable to spell out the concept of an actor or agent, which is however inescapably presupposed both by morality and by the causal analyses currently prevailing in political science.

Having retrieved a clearer understanding of “power” from the observation of ordinary language, we are thus able to apply a sort of transcendental, immanent, critique to specialized languages for which the proper meaning of power is a condition of possibility, even while they erase it from their frameworks, on account of their theoretical and practical goals. Those specialized discourses (here political science and philosophy, though the argument could be extended to other disciplines) could purchase consistency at the price of completely removing “power”, and some have indeed been moving in that direction. The problem is that, in order to do this coherently, they would also have to remove any notion of agency – for it is plainly incongruent to conceive of

an actor who is entirely determined by necessity – and with that they would lose any plausible claim to be discourses about politics.

As we noted, the substantive issue of whether a power-less, and thence a-political, description could be factually correct is beside the scope of this enquiry; for that is a metaphysical question, which could not be answered by mere conceptual analysis. Nevertheless, we may now begin to appreciate how radically we would have to revise our most basic understanding for such a “power-less” account to make sense to us. It is important to stress, once more, how this radical, possibly undesirable, revision is what would be required to bring coherence to the present disciplines which variously eschew power. To the contrary, in clarifying meanings and spelling out their implications, we are taking a relatively conservative stance. We are not proposing a novel conception or theory, but merely making explicit what we already have, implicitly, available in ordinary language. The conceptual work and its result may seem strange or new to specialists – some of whom, as we observed, have all but given up on making sense of “power”<sup>3</sup> – but only because their understanding has been distanced from common linguistic use by their disciplinary goals.

The meaning of power implies the ideas of a person to and by whom possibilities in the world are being represented. This cluster of concepts – variously declined under the names of agency, autonomy, subjectivity, freedom, *etc.* – is presupposed (and yet at once denied) both by causal analyses and by attempts to ground the normativity of politics in some form of morality. Indeed, it has to be implicitly presupposed by any enquiry that claimed to be at least minimally consistent

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3. *Supra*, pp. 41 ff.

with our ordinary way of thinking and speaking about ourselves. Under such non-clarified guise it is possible to find correspondences for our proposed definitions almost everywhere, from analytic philosophy to “folk” discourses about politics, even while attempts to explicitly formulate the definition itself have, until now, failed.

As already noted,<sup>4</sup> “representation” ties our triplet together, since a “person” is nothing but the representation of a potential actor,<sup>5</sup> while phenomenologically a “world” is nothing but “the sum total of all appearances”,<sup>6</sup> which has to be actively represented to/by someone, and finally possibilities can only appear as such when represented, for by definition they have no necessary being. Through the concept of representation we can observe the intrinsic relation between power and language, since representing something as possible requires a sufficiently articulated language.<sup>7</sup> We could similarly make sense of Critical Theory’s attempts to conjoin a realistic assessment of power with normative considerations. Representation does in fact underlie both power and justice/normativity, even if the connection between one and the other cannot be the functionalist one claimed by Habermas, nor the immediately conceptual one posited by Forst.

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4. *Supra*, p. 79.

5. In this case, it is proper to speak of “potential”, because the concept of personality implies the capacity to act, that is to say to be an actor/agent, but at this level of abstraction any possible act would count for the same (in the sense of determining the meaning of person and actor), and thus would correspond to just one specific actualization of the potential. Moreover, the concept of “person” does not imply that the potential acts are also represented as possible by the actor in question. This is to clarify how power implies personality, that is to say the concept of “person” is a condition for “power” to make sense, but not vice versa, for there can be a powerless person.

6. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 406, 466 [KrV B391, B447].

7. *Supra*, pp. 74-79, 133.



The representation of possibilities is presupposed by the ideas of just and unjust, which are in principle inapplicable to what is deemed to necessarily be the case,<sup>8</sup> just as it is presupposed by the meaning of power. It is a truism that we worry about justice and injustice only with regard to those matters we may have some power to affect; in this sense justice implies power but the reverse, *pace* Forst, is not true, the connection rather lying in the fact that both are conditional upon the representative capacities of our languages.

Now, the object of a representation is by definition an appearance, in the sense that a representation implies a “representee” to whom it appears. Likewise, an appearance is always represented: even if we assumed that the world of appearances is connected to an underlying reality “in itself”,<sup>9</sup> it is only when the thing in itself is represented that it becomes a phenomenon to us. That is to say, even assuming the existence of an underlying reality, it is only through its being represented into an appearance that the world is present to us and, with that, possibly available to our power.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, when we act, that is to say when we exercise some power, we are always acting in relation to what we (correctly or not) represent as possible. We may or may not be the only beings who act on their representations,<sup>11</sup> but we certainly do so act. It is indeed intrinsic to the con-

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8. So that it would not make sense, except in jest, to complain about the injustice of the force of gravity. This is not limited to physical laws, but may be applied to more dynamic behaviors as well, as for example in *The Scorpion and the Frog* fable, where the former character deflects the normative claim of the latter on the ground of his nature necessitating him to behave the way he did. Instinct, so conceived, would be the direction of a potentiality inexorably actualized into a specific behavior, in the specific case no less necessary than any other natural law.

9. As we may be compelled to do if we listen to Kant: *Ibid.*, 354-365 [KrV B294-315].

10. That is to say, it is only as *phenomena* that objects are given to us, or vice versa, we cannot speak at all of a world of objects which is not at once a phenomenal world, see: *Ibid.*, 362-364 [KrV B311-314].

11. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 29, 45 [Ak 4:412, 4:427].

cept of action, as opposed to automatic behavior,<sup>12</sup> that it is directed by representations rather than by causal necessities. From an actor's point of view, these representations are always appearances of worldly possibilities (even if they may be dutiful, *i.e.* morally necessary), in that it would not make sense to say that we are performing an action if both the performance and its results were not contingent from our point of view.

In this last chapter, we will further explore the relation between power and appearances, spelling out the connection with representation and thus how linguistic interactions are conditions to detach a space of possibility from the necessity of being. Then, under the problematic assumption that the meaning of "power" does make sense to us (whatever our metaphysical understanding of reality is),<sup>13</sup> we will discuss the conditions for a space of appearances, which in the end will practically correspond to a shared world, to exist. As a conclusion, this will merely be a modest opening, toward what should be not the sole, but certainly the first and most fundamental, subject matter of political thought.

## 5.1. Appearances and power: representation, persuasion, judgment

By a long tradition, appearances are defined by their changeability. They are not just changeable in time: that could still be reconciled with being, precisely through the idea of potentiality employed

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12. On the distinction between action and behavior, see: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 8, 40-45, 205-206, 322-324.

13. As anticipated in our introduction, this marks the point at which we shall abandon the terrain of ordinary language. The analysis that preceded merely established the need to either come up with an account for "power" to have some reality, or radically revise our language and understanding to do without such concept. Here we conclude with a brief sketch, or just a beginning, of such account; the conceptual analysis, however, still set the relevant conditions both for those who would prefer a different theorization and for those who, instead, would rather do without "power" altogether.

by Aristotle.<sup>14</sup> Rather, appearances have little stability even at any given instant. As per the classic example, an oar in the water appears bent,<sup>15</sup> but at that moment we do not know that it is, in fact, straight either, since from our knowledge that the appearance is fallacious we cannot yet derive any determined notion of an undistorted reality. Most importantly, the appearance of the crooked wood will be different not only depending on its position, but also on those of the observers. That, however, is true for each and every thing, not only for those refracted through water.

Obviously, the appearances that are most relevant for politics and power may be significantly more complex than those of physical objects, since the layers of conceptualization multiply, branch off, becoming more intricate and prone to conflict. The most apparent phenomena are those involving our actions and interactions; there the meaning of any given event (and its definition as an event in the first place), while still grounded in some objectivity, is amply pliable to the observers' perspectives, and the conceptual apparatuses they bring with them. This especially apparent character of power, so to speak, is the deeper reason for the proximity of lying and politics, for the dangerous tendency of power to obliterate factual truth, and for the correlative "despotic character" of truth.<sup>16</sup>

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14. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Θ. *Supra*, p. 85.

15. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 31.

16. Arendt, "Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers"; Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future* (London, New York: Penguin, 1993). Incidentally, the recognition of the intrinsic tension between power and truth is one more reason to abandon the fallacious idea that Arendt had a one-sidedly positive appreciation for power, which we discussed in the previous chapter.

These issues are often discussed from the point of view of the power someone may have of determining such appearances – so that the power of assigning meanings to events surely is significant, or possibly even the most impactful power.<sup>17</sup> True, as far as it goes, but from the vantage point here gained, we may see how the determination of meaning and values is where the power ends – it is where possibilities are actualized (if perhaps only temporarily) into a shared reality, the necessity of which, from the observers' perspectives, is what makes it relevant to have (or having had) the power to effect (or even merely affect) such determination. On this point, we could well agree with Nietzsche:

The lordly right of giving names extends so far that one should allow oneself to conceive the origin of language itself as an expression of power on the part of the rulers: they say “this *is* this and this,” they seal every thing and event with a sound and, as it were, take possession of it.<sup>18</sup>

But this particular “power of speech” [*Machtäusserung*], like any specified power, would better be understood in the sense of a potentiality oriented toward a given actualization, while the power properly so called would be that of employing (or not), in which way and to what end, such potential to determine appearances.

The point that, instead, is usually not given enough attention is how the not-yet-collapsed possibilities are evident in the different representations of what could be, from some metaphysical standpoint, one and the same being. The possibility of seeing things differently, which defines ap-

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17. This could be one way to look at the ideological domination discussed by Lukes, although that would be also more broadly concerned with the power of determining the conceptual framework that itself informs the assignment of meanings to appearances: Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, ch. 3.

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 26.

pearances as such – from the perspectives of different persons, and also for the same person through time – is a basic condition for power, both in the sense that it underlies the capacity to represent possibilities, and that it makes it possible for opinions to be swayed by persuasion (that is to say, for the aforementioned power of determining shared appearances to be effective). Our condition of plurality – which entails the multiplicity of perspectives, ends, and representations – is what makes possibilities, and power, enter our world.

Thus, we may now more precisely understand why:

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the condition – not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life.<sup>19</sup>

The unsettling uncertainty we may experience, if we earnestly consider different perspectives about some matter we care about, is a way of perceiving the presence of possibility, that is to say the anxiety-inducing absence of being,<sup>20</sup> which may itself be seen as motivating the long-standing antipathy of philosophers for appearances and politics at once.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, these diverse and haphazard representations that are the phenomena as they appear to us, with their many-to-

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19. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

20. “... the abyss of nothingness that opens up before any deed that cannot be accounted for by a reliable chain of cause and effect and is inexplicable in Aristotelian categories of potentiality and actuality”: Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Willing, 207.

21. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 20, 220-221.

one relation to being, allow one to experience the exhilaration of action and power, the pleasure of making one's own representations into worldly realities.

An error underlying many understandings of power is to neglect the connection with plurality, and thus fall into the belief that the closing of available possibilities into determinate actualities is everything that matters.<sup>22</sup> This brings the focus on the means to achieve the result, shifting into the familiar gear of instrumental thinking, transfiguring "power" into a force, or resource, oriented toward a specific end: potentiality, not power properly so called, as we have seen throughout this work.

Thus, those who have/want power, as well as those who take politics as their object of study, tend to focus on the accumulation of the means to the ends at hand, and then the means to acquire those means, and so on and so forth. This chain of instrumentality is tied by the modality of necessity, with the result that theories and practices are chock-full of power-as-potentiality, while power-as-possibility tends to disappear. The latter, however, is the one that matters most, unless we were happy to accept that we all are powerless pawns, working as transmitters of potentials for ends we may not share, or even be unaware of. And even if we could be so happy – a purely descriptive "perspective from nowhere", if there ever was one – that would still imply losing politics as a domain for both action and theory/science; something which most theorists, scientists or political actors, would not seem ready to accept.

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22. Which is a form of the "vehicle fallacy", but is at once coherent with the rise of instrumental thinking as the chief model of rationality in the modern world: *Ibid.*

To exemplify the distinction, let us consider the use of money in electoral campaigns.<sup>23</sup> Whatever goal one candidate has, they need to be elected in order to be in the position to achieve, or contribute to achieve, it. Being elected is a means to the end of realizing the goal. Election places one in the position of having the power-as-potential that is needed to actualize the power-as-possibility in the realization of the goal (which was for them possible to choose, to begin with). Presently, in order to be elected one needs money to pay for all the costly activities associated with campaigning. To get this means to the means to the end, one then needs to cater to the desires of actual or potential donors. One then has a strong incentive to adjust to the ends/goals preferred by the donors, which may or may not correspond to those initially held by the politician.

In this way, one loses at least part, and possibly all, of their power: the possibility of choosing one's own ends is diminished or even foreclosed. The means tend to overtake the end, and since it is by no means sure that wealthy people represent themselves as having many possibilities available – oftentimes, though not necessarily always, large amounts of property come with their own compulsions, such as the perceived need of protecting and increasing the property itself or, at the opposite, to squander it into laboriously lavish lifestyles – this may leave us in a situation with no power properly so called, or anyway significantly less than could seem without considering these elements. If the motivations of the aspiring politician could be fully explained in terms of game-theoretic rationality, and if the motivations of the donors could themselves be reduced to psychological and social causes, then truly there would be no power left in the picture, with everyone be-

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23. The same reasoning, however, could be extended to any means one may need to obtain in order to gain the power to pursue further ends.

ing (from their or the observer's perspective) compelled to apply causal means (potentialities) to produce certain necessary effects.

This is where persuasion – that is to say the potential to change representations held by others – enters the picture, and at once comes back to power. Persuasion – whether by words or deeds, but always including some representation of the ends or goals to be shared – is means-less, not in the sense that we cannot use means to better persuade, but rather in the sense that the effects of persuasion transcend the potentiality of whatever means employed in effecting it. This is so precisely because it is merely possible, but not necessary, that the addressees/observers will in fact be persuaded. This uncertainty of the result, an instance of the unpredictability of action,<sup>24</sup> makes whatever means (little or many as they may be) relatively incidental to the end.

For example, we might connect the success of the Reformation to the new technical means of the printing press, even asserting that the former would have been impossible without the latter.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, a Luther, a Calvin, and many other great persuaders, were surely needed; otherwise an unpersuasive written word would have fallen flat, no matter how widespread by technical means. In fact, there are many cases where an abundance of means could not make a message persuasive, or vice versa (if perhaps more rarely) where words and deeds, with little to no means to back them up, still proved to be powerful.

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24. *Ibid.*, 191-192, 233, 243ff.

25. Mark Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Minneapolis MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 1, 7.



To return to the previous example, if money in politics worked exactly like money in a retail exchange – *i.e.* for a set amount of money invested in political propaganda one could obtain a set and predictable number of votes, just like I know that if I paid  $x$  money I would be able to walk out of the store with item  $y$  – then the value of the money the candidate could obtain would be exactly the same as the value of the effects achieved through them. Consequently, the donors would have all the ground to demand to receive an equal value back from their candidate. If a similar system worked perfectly and in conditions of perfect information (as of course is never the case for actual markets), then the whole causative power of politics would be at the bidding of those who provided the money.<sup>26</sup>

The same logic, generalized, would eliminate power altogether, for if all the exchanges of means were between equal values, everybody would necessarily act in order to get the necessary means to equally necessary ends, and then there would be no point in politics, action, and persuasion, for everything would better be regulated by equal exchanges through money, or other systemic media.<sup>27</sup> The only deviations from necessity would be due to lapses in strategic rationality.

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26. Reality may approximate this dystopia (though of course the interpretation of complex political phenomena is always very contentious), see for example: Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*; Kay L. Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady, *The Uneven Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

27. In Habermasian jargon, this would correspond to a thorough “colonization”: Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, chs. 6, 8. While Habermas’ analysis and critique of a systemic theory of society is useful to conceptualize this issue, it should be noted how from the perspective of assessing power the appropriate antonym cannot be his *Lebenswelt*, for the unmediated communication in the Lifeworld could be just as necessitating as any systemic logic (as anyone who has ever been to a large family dinner knows all too well). On the other hand, our focus on representations allows us to reconstruct the conceptual nexus between power and the strategic action that is typical of systemic interactions, for the capacity to posit an end and act on it is predicated upon the same representative operations that constitute the meaning of “power”.

But, whatever the causes of these “errors” (lack of information, ethical values, emotions, *etc.*), the point remains that purely strategic/systemic interactions allow no space for power properly so called.

If we return to consider persuasion, however, we can see that even in the case of the most mediated communications (such as advertisement), the fact that people may, or may not, be persuaded by the message is what adds the differential value that makes the ends, and the people holding them, not fungible. This is an uncertainty which cannot be reduced to randomness, it is indeed a chance present before an actor, as observed in Weber’s definition of power.<sup>28</sup> If a political message – for both its content and the unique way in which it may be represented by a candidate – happens to be persuasive to people, then the candidate will surely need all sort of means, and the compromises coming along with them, but they will maintain some measure of power properly so called. If, instead, the means of advertisement were themselves determinative, then the message and the candidate would be irrelevant, and thus would tend to powerlessness.

We could go one step further, for in principle (in ideal conditions of perfect information and frictionless exchange) the very efficacy of the means would make it perfectly fungible with money, and thus disappear as a separate means. For, given a necessarily determinate effect, the value of the means would be exactly the same as the amount of money needed to achieve the same end – thus if advertisement worked perfectly, in ideal market conditions it would also cost the same as handing out money to the intended targets of the “persuasion”. The same logic would ap-

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28. *Supra*, p. 162.

ply to any other exchangeable systemic medium. It is because rhetoric and persuasion do not really work that way – entailing no necessary result, even while not being reducible to randomness either<sup>29</sup> – that they can be immaterial means for power, thus giving value to the various technical implements and material resources needed to make better use of them.

Within a different disciplinary jargon (which underlies the most advanced formulations of Critical Theory, by Habermas and Apel),<sup>30</sup> maintaining the connection between perlocutionary effects of speech acts, their illocutionary performance, and their locutionary content, is a condition for power to make sense. The same applies to the deeds that are themselves linguistically interpreted, judged, and narrated. When, instead, language is employed in a purely strategic way, when its perlocutionary effects are divorced from its illocutionary conditions of validity, then speech is effectively made equivalent to other media of exchange, thus being behold to the same systemic imperatives,<sup>31</sup> leaving no space for power properly so called.

Or, in still different words:

Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities,

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29. Indeed, not even the direct use of money does always work that way, for even a bribe to vote for one candidate may be accepted or refused, thus not being entirely reducible to a fungible price.

30. A problem in the understanding of discourse theory, beyond the “discourse ethics” it has often been reduced to, is that with the exception of Habermas’ *Theory of Communicative Action*, – which, however, is anything but a synthetic exposition, and is further complicated by its very broad socio-historical account of modern society and its sciences – its presentation is scattered through many short essays. For an overview, see: Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Communication*; Karl-Otto Apel, *From A Transcendental-Semiotic Point of View* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

31. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, chs. 6-7; Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 39-41, 76-79.

and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.<sup>32</sup>

Here as elsewhere, Arendt's words have been often misread as if they represented a factual description (and perhaps a fanciful one), whereas they are just part of the phenomenological analysis of the conditions for power and action. Had words and deeds parted ways – either because the deeds became mute behaviors with predictable effects, or because the words lost contact with the appearances of a shared world – power would have no reality whatsoever.

The same connection between illocution and perlocution,<sup>33</sup> the performative content of speech and its effects on others, may be taken as the ground of normativity if one buys at least the general lines of discourse theory, as I would be inclined to do. This brings back power and normativity to the same source in language's representative capacities, and by the same token may be considered an analysis of why we “intuitively” attribute moral duties and responsibilities only to actors we deem to have the relevant powers. None of this, though, makes “power” a normatively oriented concept, except than in the limited sense in which it always has to do with the attribution of statuses –  $x$  counts as  $y$  – for such operation is intrinsic to any representative act, including the representation of possibilities. This attributive function may be considered normative, as in

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32. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200. In reading this, we should keep in mind how the violence of brutal deeds is specifically speechless, “... sheer violence is mute ...”: *Ibid.*, 26.

33. As mentioned, here we are taking “illocution” and “perlocution” largely as meant by Habermas: Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, 286-95. The terms were introduced into the philosophical jargon by John L. Austin, with a somewhat different meaning: John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). For a summary of the nuances and transformations in the understanding of “illocution” and “perlocution”, across time and different philosophical perspectives, see: Marina Sbisà, “Locution, illocution, perlocution,” in *Pragmatics of Speech Actions*, ed. Marina Sbisà, and Ken Turner (Berlin: de Gruyter Mouton, 2013).

Searle's concept of deontic powers,<sup>34</sup> in that "x counts as y" has the form of a norm, but not in the sense of being oriented toward either good or bad, just or unjust.

Deontic operations are evident in the constitution of "institutional facts",<sup>35</sup> that are so central to politics. The United States' Supreme Court effectively has the power of giving final decisions on the constitutionality of federal and State laws, because most people believe it to have such power. This belief may be mediated by the shared recognition of a literal legal norm, as when the constitution states that Congress counts as the lawmaking body,<sup>36</sup> or it may not, as when the common belief that the Supreme Court counts as a constitutional court has no basis in the Constitution or any statutory law. Normativity, in this broad sense, is constitutive of power because it creates possibilities out of nothing,<sup>37</sup> thanks to the fact that people are potentially capable to act on their representations.

This is not the case for the manipulation of physical reality, nor for other methods of human interactions mediated by incentives or coercion, because those depends on the availability of material resources, which are often scarce and anyway must themselves be acquired, thus always be-

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34. John R. Searle, "Social Ontology and Political Power," in *Freedom and Neurobiology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Searle, *Making the Social World*, ch. 7. Like other examples here examined, Searle's idea of "deontic powers" capture a fundamental aspect of the concept of power, even if not explicitly recognized as such by the author, who sees them as a sub-set of the general concept. See also mine: Guido Parietti, "Social Ontology and the Concept of Power," in *The Nature of Social Reality*, ed. Emanuele Fadda, *et al.* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

35. Searle, "Social Ontology and Political Power," 9.

36. *Constitution of the United States*, Article I, Section 1.

37. There still are, of course, the necessities inherent in sustaining a life that makes one capable to appear in public, but those do not create power so much as allowing its potential subject (for one could be well-fed and clothed, and still take no part in the realm of appearances, and thus have no power) to exist.

ing bound, one way or another, to necessity. It is precisely because, as they saying goes, “talk is cheap” that, when appropriately persuasive, it can be so powerful. The “cheapness” is what allows speech to work as a power-multiplier, as it were. If one can persuade someone, they can obtain something by spending little or nothing – although one also pays for this “cheapness” through the inherent unpredictability of acting together. Voluntary compliance, in fact, is presupposed almost everywhere, even when material incentives and/or coercion are employed against deviant behaviors.

The attribution of a status which characterizes normative propositions is just another way to name the representation of anything as something, that is to say the capacity to perceive and produce appearances. Here we do not need to take a stance on whether Searle’s separation between “brute” and “institutional” facts is sustainable, nor on the underlying metaphysical position.<sup>38</sup> What we may say is that, however the respective domains are delimited, “brute facts” cannot be constitutive of power properly so called. Non-representational facts may confer power-as-potentiality, so that having a weapon in hand makes one more capable of applying violence (or having the appropriate material resources makes one able to create an object). Such potentialities may contribute to enhance the power of an actor, but possibilities can only be given through representations, appearances. The same facts, shooting a gun or making an artifact, would count as exercises of power, or not, depending on the relevant representations of possibilities to and by the

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38. John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 50-53; Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, ch. 7-8. Following Kant, it seems to me that an a-conceptual knowledge is impossible, and thus all facts, insofar as they are facts for us, are always “institutional” or “deontic” in Searle’s language, even though their underlying, and for us unreachable, metaphysical reality may be “brute”. We don’t need, however, to delve into this debate here.

involved agents. Thus, if there may be “brute facts” in a metaphysical sense, the common expression “brute power” remains quite misleading.

As we observed,<sup>39</sup> one can have the power to deploy the mute means of coercion and violence; but power properly so called is never “brute”, for it always depends on the representative operations that are akin, in Searle’s jargon, to the deontic definition of institutional facts. We should note, though, that while “brute facts” would always be in some sense necessitating – and thus could not constitute power, even if they could be implements for it within an otherwise powerful representational context – not all “institutional facts”, not all representations of appearances, are contingent from a personal perspective. For all sorts of reasons – from mere habit to superstition, from sheer lack of thinking to entrenched ideology – certain linguistically created facts may, by some or all, be represented as utterly necessary.

Such was the case, for example, of the “panorama” of relentless repetitions of ideologic slogans, as described in Václav Havel’s *The Power of the Powerless*. Each and every instance of such repeated representation becomes even invisible to most people, and yet taken together they form a “huge backdrop to daily life”,<sup>40</sup> which is perceived as thoroughly necessary – at least until someone finds the initiative and courage to question it publicly, recreating at once a space of possibility (however fragile and potentially ephemeral under the threat of violent repression). “Accepting appearances as reality” represents them as necessary, non-pliable to anyone’s power.<sup>41</sup> Havel was

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39. *Supra*, p. 223.

40. Havel, “The power of the powerless,” 35.

41. *Ibid.*, 31.

writing about the peculiar conditions of a “post-totalitarian” society, but a similar phenomenon may happen with all sort of social constructs, from common curtesy to prejudices against any sort of “those people”.<sup>42</sup>

So long as appearances, whatever their specific content, were represented as necessary, they would behave just like brute facts from the perspective of power (or the lack thereof). The relevant distinction, cutting across those very different examples, is not that between social/institutional and natural/brute facts, but rather between those appearances that are represented as pliable to possibility and those that are represented as necessary.<sup>43</sup> Both kinds of representations are artificial constructs but (up to the point when the perception of necessity happens to be actively challenged) their relations to power are opposite. In this sense, the privilege accorded to the common distinction between natural and artificial – as a consequence of which private and social domains are conflated with political ones – is predicated on metaphysical assumptions that do not take heed of power.

We have observed how appearances are characterized by their being pliable to persuasion, to be changed by linguistic and symbolic communication, and how that connects with the creation of a space for power. Being moved to act by representations, in fact, basically means to create acts

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42. To be clear, here we are not saying that each and every reification of a represented appearance is undesirable, though many are. Arguably, to the contrary, at least part of our world has to be constituted in such way, for otherwise we could not maintain any mental stability. This connects with Arendt’s discussion of prejudices: Arendt, “Introduction Into Politics,” 99 ff.

43. This framing, incidentally, has the advantage of being metaphysically parsimonious, since it remains neutral on the reasons why certain appearances seems necessary and other not, eschewing the endless debates about realism and idealism, constructivism and positivism, nature and nurture, ontological monism and pluralism, *etc.*



and events out of nothing, which is fundamental for the proper meaning of power to have a referent in our world, since otherwise the only kind of interactions would in principle be equal strategic exchanges. Those would be reducible to the systemic logic of mediated strategic interactions, where any escape from necessity could only be due to errors or randomness. Power, as it were, may be present only in the space between certainty and randomness.<sup>44</sup> This conceptual space corresponds to the exercise of judgment, in the classic Kantian sense, to the operation of gathering individual instances under a concept, or singular cases under a general rule.<sup>45</sup>

Such exercise is not random or chaotic, but neither it can be subsumed under either will/intention or reason. We would not say that we are properly judging if what we are doing is simply to assert what we want to be true/correct. On the other hand, while surely the use of reason is exercised through the production of judgments, the latter cannot be reduced to any law-like regularity, because it is itself the faculty to apply rules to concrete cases. This is, again, akin to Wittgenstein's paradox of rule-following.<sup>46</sup> Now, though, we can see that it is also the same kind of operation involved in Searle's deontic functions, in the capacity to raise and respond to validity claim which is the ultimate ground of Habermas' discourse philosophy or, most generally, in the representation of anything as something, that is to say in the constitution, for us, of a world, or a space of appearances.

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44. Which we have observed being both reducible to modalities of necessity: *infra*, §§ 3.1-3.2

45. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 268 [KrV B172]; Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 4.

46. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§201-202.

Thus, while in the third chapter we briefly noted how the exercise of judgment, with all its uncertainties, is integral to a proper understanding of politics,<sup>47</sup> now we can better place into focus how the same judgment is constitutive, through the representative capacities of language, of appearances, of the domain of possibilities, of power properly so called as may be experienced in this world. This ties together the connection between actors and spectators in constituting the space of appearances which is the domain of power. Judgment is the faculty that allows the representation of appearances – even at the limit when they are ideologically represented as if they were perfectly stable and unchangeable realities, which tend to paradoxically shut down judgment itself, as in Havel's example. Judgment is also at once the faculty involved in responding to those appearances, freely but not randomly, being moved by representations rather than by the potential force of incentives or threats. It is through the exercise of judgment that we can perceive appearances as a worldly reality, which is contingent and yet meaningful for us, pliable to our subjective choices and yet endowed with its own objectivity.

Now, appearances and the representative operations underlying them are inherently spatial – both in the literal sense that the sensory perceptions leading to appearances happen in a physical space, and in the figurative sense that the semantic exchanges inherent to persuasion presuppose a public space where actors and spectators can interact. Power, thus, exists for us only in the space of appearances, where representations are persuasively constructed, judiciously received, challenged, maintained or modified.

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47. As opposed to the pretension to reduce it to causal and statistical regularities: *supra*, pp. 165-168.

This leaves undetermined the line of demarcation between appearances and underlying reality, except for assuming that there is such a dualism because it is in the relation between perspectival representations and intersubjective claims to objectivity that a shared world may exist as a space for power. But if we wanted to reduce appearances back to any underlying being, whichever our metaphysical theory, we would thereby lose the very language we need to make sense of power. And this is what has largely happened, first with ancient philosophy, then in its reception into Christian theology and finally, through the framework of modern social science, in the attempts to frame politics into causal and probabilistic explanations. Any attempt, explicit or implicit, to reduce appearances to a stable ontological reality undermines the condition to understand power – and eventually its practical reality, if such ways of thinking became influent, as they have.

This means that the fragility of the space of appearances,<sup>48</sup> which constantly needs to be renewed and remade, is not to be taken as an empirical fact, but rather as an intrinsic defining character, without which power could not mean what it means for us. If appearances were not transient, they would not be appearances but rather just beings. And it is precisely because appearances do not have the stable necessity of being that they are pliable to the representations of actors and the judgment of spectators, thus constituting the fundamental condition for power. From our point of view, as actors as well as observers of politics, such intrinsic fragility of the space of appearances – as opposed to the moral, religious, metaphysics, or empirical assumptions underlying most of modern and contemporary political thought – is of primary importance for

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48. Or “The Frailty of Human Affairs”: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, § 26.

both theory and practice. Without taking cognizance the connection between power and appearances, no understanding of politics would be sound. Without constantly tending to the fragility of such space, no political action would be possible.

This is why Arendt was correct in individuating the preoccupation for the world – as opposed to one's own soul, morality, or whatever ideological project – as the defining trait of truly political thinkers:

Though it is true that, by resisting evil, you are likely to be involved in evil, your care for the world takes precedence in politics over your care for your self—whether this self is your body or your soul. (Machiavelli's "I love my native city more than my soul" is only a variation of: I love the world and its future more than my life or my self.)<sup>49</sup>

We would better follow Arendt's spirit in both thinking an action – regardless of whether we agree or not, or even understand, the more specific points of her political thought – for no matter how paramount our ends, values, and our private selves, may appear to be, undermining the conditions of power can only make us powerless, which is to say equally incapable of pursuing our ends and expressing who we are through our actions. Thus, we will conclude with by discussing in more detail some implications of this stance

## 5.2. Saving the Appearances

The most basic condition for the concept of power to have a referent is the creation and maintenance of a space of appearances, which is to say a common world as a theatre for our interac-

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49. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 50. Machiavelli's quote is from his *Letter to Francesco Vettori*, written shortly before the author's death in 1527, making the statement all the more remarkable.

tions, or, simply, politics. What remains to be discussed is how such creation and maintenance can be achieved and, correlatively, to what dangers it is exposed. Now, decline and decay – that institutions may fail, democracies degenerate, and republics lapse into either chaos or dictatorship – are clearly long standing, but still well alive,<sup>50</sup> tropes of political thought. The widespread appreciation for the fragility of political institutions, however, is not usually connected with the disappearance of power, and much the less with its basic conditions of possibility.

That the space of appearances as such could be “lost”, and might have to be “saved”, may seem an odd proposition. This would obviously be so from a metaphysical standpoint that assumes the independent underlying reality of the world and our perceptions of it, well corresponding to common “folk” understandings of what a world is. If being is all that there is, then clearly it cannot be lost. But even from a phenomenological point of view, the conditions corresponding to power might seem so basic that their absence would be almost unthinkable. As Arendt herself wrote, action is the most defining quality of our lives,<sup>51</sup> losing that would mean nothing less than losing our humanity. Here, we mostly focused on linguistic representative capacities as a root condition for power, and language does not seem in any danger of disappearing, however distorted its uses may be.

On the other hand, throughout this work we have observed how power and the domain of possibility tend to be expelled by discourses about politics across different disciplines, both nor-

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50. E.g. Bruce Ackerman, *The Decline and Fall of the American Republic* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

51. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, § 24.

mative and empirical. The loss, practical and conceptual, of a political space is the leitmotif of much of Arendt's work, which for this reason has often been accused of being unduly nostalgic.<sup>52</sup> From a broader point of view, considerations about the waning of meaning inherent to modernity are quite widespread: from Weber's "disenchantment" to Habermas' diagnosis about the colonization of the lifeworld.<sup>53</sup> The critique of technology and its accompanying nostalgic mindset, which runs the gamut from Gandhi to Heidegger, may also be taken as an example of this widespread feeling of loss. Likewise, at a lower level of theoretical refinement, the decline of political effectiveness, in the face of seemingly automatic global economic processes, is acutely felt through democratic societies; nowadays often leading to a dangerous levels of disillusionment with established institutions. Of course, we should not conflate these different perspectives;<sup>54</sup> yet it is clear how Arendt has not been the only one to worry about losing space for meaningful action, even while the specifics of her diagnosis remain highly original.

How, then, should we reconcile a common sense for the fragility of action, meaning, and freedom, with the fact that we have brought power back to conditions that, while not metaphysically

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52. E.g.: Stemberger, "The Sunken City: Hannah Arendt's Idea of Politics"; Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 112; Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge MA, London: MIT Press, 1992), 74-76. Against the "nostalgia" critique, see: Peter J. Euben, "Arendt's Hellenism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana R. Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

53. Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *The Vocation Lectures: Science as a Vocation, Politics as a Vocation* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004); Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, ch. 8.

54. The proximity between Habermas' social theory and Arendt phenomenology has at times been exaggerated, including by Habermas himself, see: Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power"; Arie Brand, "The 'Colonization of the Lifeworld' and the Disappearance of Politics – Arendt and Habermas," *Thesis Eleven* 13 (1986).

determined, still are so basic to our form of life that their disappearance may seem unthinkable?

The solution, perhaps ironically, lies in the very of concept of potentiality we have been so careful to distinguish “power” from:

The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized. Its peculiarity is that, unlike the spaces which are the work of our hands, it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men – as in the case of great catastrophes when the body politic of a people is destroyed – but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves. Wherever people gather together, it is *potentially* there, but only potentially, *not necessarily and not forever*.<sup>55</sup>

Accordingly, our understanding of the conditions for power should be layered. We might reprise, in a sense, Aristotle’s distinction between first and second actualities and potentialities.<sup>56</sup> At a first level, the fact that we use languages, that we are capable of entertaining representations, communicating them to others, and acting upon them,<sup>57</sup> appears sufficient to explain power. On the other hand, innumerable factors may prevent this potential from being actualized: from the destruction of public spaces in a tyranny to our being overwhelmingly occupied with matters of survival and other bodily necessities. We can keep necessity at bay, in our theoretical understanding of power, by avoiding to make it part of an ontological account; it is an altogether different

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55. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 199, emphasis added.

56. Aristotle, *De Anima* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), II.1, II.5 [412a-413a1-10, 417a22-30].

57. A condition which itself depends on our physical constitution, leaving aside the issue of its epistemological and metaphysical status. It should also be noted that these elements could also be further analyzed, so that the communication of representations could be conditional upon first being able to conceive them in thought, or vice versa, depending on what theory of mind and language we subscribed to. We will not dwell on these details, since they are not especially relevant for the present discourse.

matter to escape, in practice, the experience of being variously compelled by ourselves, others, and by the sheer fact of our physicality.

We may well be linguistic beings, capable of representations and of acting upon them, thus potentially open to possibilities before us, which is the same as to think of ourselves as free actors. Yet language itself may be employed under the modality of necessity, and it is often so experienced, from the semi-automatic exchange of customary greetings, to the deference due to one's superiors, and the innumerable other cases in which we feel compelled to speak so and so for all sort of reasons. The same is more broadly true for all sort of acts. The potentiality to initiate a radically new causal chain may, in a sense, always be there.<sup>58</sup> Yet, such potential beginnings are not manifest in many of our daily activities, behaviors we see as variously determined: from our bodily urges to the necessity of going to work to earn a wage. It is only under specific circumstances that we do represent ourselves as having possibilities; while such representation may arguably always be potentially there, due to our physical, psychological, and linguistic constitution,<sup>59</sup> this potentiality for power will only be actualized under certain conditions which will not always be present.

Thus, the "first potentiality" of our capacity for representations, and therefore action, can become a "second potentiality/first actuality" when a space of appearances is carved out of the necessities that would otherwise dominate our experience. This may be exemplified by those sponta-

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58. This may be called the Will, although this identification is, in my opinion, one of the least convincing aspects of Arendt's work: Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Thinking, 213, Willing, 110, 207.

59. Jumping back to yet another jargon, we might say that we possess the intrinsic "ability" to be in a condition of power, but not always the "ableness" to be so positioned: Morriss, *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, ch. 11.



neous eruptions of collective action that characterize revolutionary moments, as well as by less dramatic “new beginning[s]”,<sup>60</sup> happening daily in more settled political conditions.

This is not to erase the difference between foundational events and more ordinary actions, but simply to note how both are characterized by happening in a space where people can see and be seen as actors. It is intrinsic to action (as opposed to behavior) that it has to appear to, and be liable to the judgment of, actual or potential spectators. In this respect, the difference between these kinds of action is surely relevant, but not categorical. It is more of a matter of degree, since neither a revolution nor, say, voting or going to a demonstration happen in the void. At the very least, both ordinary and extraordinary beginnings are predicated on the same potentialities for speech and action.<sup>61</sup>

By and large, every action carries its own space of appearances. For it is only by appearing to others, thus eliciting judgments and reactions, that action may be defined as escaping the bounds of necessity. Even the limited extent to which it may be possible to freely act while alone is predicated on the fictitious reduplication of oneself into doer and spectator. So we may represent our act as not necessitated to the extent that we perform and judge it at once. But even this depends on a form of life that, as a whole, includes the actual experience of plurality, of acting and reacting, judging and be judged, *vis-à-vis* other persons. In a sense, thus, a space for action is entirely

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60. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 204.

61. The oft-repeated critique that Arendt modeled her concept of action on extraordinary foundational events could thus be easily flipped, the point is rather to recognize the continuity embedded in the conditions for power as such. Indeed, it would be quite an inscrutable position to assume an essential (rather than phenomenologically conditional) difference between actions that may be performed by the very same people at different times.

ordinary, available at any moment provided only one has the courage to embark on a new beginning. On the other hand, such space is also exposed to fall back into obscurity, to be lost moments after having been gained.<sup>62</sup>

That is so not only because the capacity for action may be overwhelmed by external necessities, but also because the web of interactions seems to have a tendency to stabilize itself into behavioral patterns. It is true that the unpredictability of action may lead to exponentially expanding consequences. A more common occurrence, however, may be that of a group coming together in a breakthrough of activity, only to fall, over time, into routine behaviors with less and less space for possibilities. Most importantly, both cases are somewhat hostile to power. This is obvious when automatic behavior overtakes action, for there can be no power properly so called outside of a condition of possibility. But there is little power also when action's unpredictability runs unbridled. There we have an abundance of possibilities, but they are not represented as available to anyone. To the contrary, the actors often disappear into the chaos they may have unwittingly generated – as has been the case, for example, with many revolutions.

It is on this level that constitution-making, and legislating in general, are indeed qualitatively different, for they produce the means to keep the space for action available,<sup>63</sup> even when action ceases or decays into routine – at least to a degree, for of course any political order requires some constant activity to be maintained. A legal order may render explicit the conditions for action (fit-

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62. Arendt, "Introduction Into Politics," 122-27.

63. Arendt, *On Revolution*, chs. 4-5.

tingly, "*legis actio*" is the name of the most ancient known form of Roman juridical procedure), stabilize the actor into a legal personality, and discursively regulate the terms upon which violence may be opposed to violence.

From this perspective, what defines law as such is its role in constituting a public space. Not its origin, as it would in the command-obedience model criticized by Arendt.<sup>64</sup> Not its form, as in Rousseau's General Will.<sup>65</sup> Not its content, as in the all-encompassing hierarchy of laws, ultimately grounded on the law of God, of Christian theology.<sup>66</sup> Much the less, finally, can law be functionally defined as a social necessity (which is perhaps the most common idea today), simply because order may be, and is, kept with all sort of means, of which law is only one, and perhaps not the most effective.

What law, uniquely, does is to maintain appearances visible *as* appearances, without reifying them into facts, givens, unchangeable realities. A legal order is explicitly fictitious, acknowledging through the very threat of punishment its distance from actual reality. This is in contrast to other social codes, traditional customs, ideologies, or religions, which rather tend to present themselves as natural facts, hiding their coercive aspects insofar as possible. From this perspective, the oft-observed weakness of laws *vis-à-vis* recalcitrant social realities is an intrinsic feature rather than a defect. The obverse of this is that law itself is relatively fragile, always in need of being decided and applied anew, therefore requiring constant action in addition to a wealth of means and re-

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64. Arendt, *On Violence*, 40-41.

65. Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social*, II.6.

66. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, First Part of the Second Part, QQ 90-96.

sources. Thus, we have to understand how making the space of appearances available means just that: providing an opening, that has then to be harnessed by actual action, and still requires all sort of material preconditions.

Nevertheless, a proper legal system constitute a common language, which can cut across different actions at different times, providing a continuity which would otherwise be impossible to maintain. Every action, every new beginning, in a sense evokes a space in which to appear, and its own peculiar language with it, but it would be an impossibly strenuous task to keep it in existence through time, if it were not somehow reified through promises and pacts, written down as contracts and laws – ultimately through the existence of a city, in both its material and legal-political sense.<sup>67</sup> We may see law as a set of deontic functions,<sup>68</sup> available to be made operative through action. In this sense law is the language that bridges the chasm between a transient space of appearances and a more durable common world. If we accepted Wittgenstein's idea that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world",<sup>69</sup> we could also understand Arendt's assertion that without law there is no world properly so called.<sup>70</sup>

Even when we find ourselves within relatively stable worldly conditions, though, power might still be only potentially there for us, in the trivial sense that we may take part to a public and yet not have much power – like ordinary citizens in a contemporary democracy, or a candidate who

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67. Arendt, "Introduction Into Politics," 123; Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 201.

68. *Supra*, p. 245.

69. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London, New York: Routledge, 2001), §5.6.

70. *Supra*, p. 74.

runs and loses. Stretching the Aristotelian partition, there may be a “third potentiality/second actuality”, corresponding to the condition of actually having power (which still may or may not be actualized) after having cleared the “first actuality” of an available public space. Even then, though, the mere availability of a space of appearances is not irrelevant, for it shifts the question of power from creating the space to appear in public to that of achieving and exercising power within such a condition.

From the first perspective, the main issue is to constitute a space capable to include everyone; which points to principled compromises and the selfless choice to place the common ahead of one's particular ends (however good they may be) but, on the flip side, also implies that whoever may contingently not be included in the aforementioned “everyone” is by definition a non-person. This is where the familiar problems concerning “constituent power” take place.<sup>71</sup> In that regard, a proper understanding of power opens up a way out of the paradoxes of popular sovereignty. The constitution of a public space, being a condition for power, including the power to realize whatever end one may have, is by definition always justified. This justification does not depend on who performed the constituting act – which is an inescapably moot question, because any actor, who could authorize anything, would have to be constituted somehow<sup>72</sup> – but rather on whether the

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71. E.g. Frank Michelman, “How Can the People Ever Make the Laws? A Critique of Deliberative Democracy,” in *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, ed. James Bohman, and William Rehg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997); Andreas Kalyvas, “Popular Sovereignty, Democracy, and the Constituent Power,” *Constellations* 12, no. 2 (2005); Hans Lindahl, “The Paradox of Constituent Power. The Ambiguous Self-Constitution of the European Union,” *Ratio Juris* 20, no. 4 (2007); Martin Loughlin, *The Paradox of Constitutionalism: Constituent Power and Constitutional Form* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Jason Frank, *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America* (2010).

72. This way of approaching the question, from Sieyès original formulation onwards, is effectively bound to fall in the “vicious circle of *pouvoir constituant* and *pouvoir constitué*”: Arendt, *On Revolution*, 166.

resulting order may be considered an available public space or not. Arendt indeed preempted, if perhaps too elliptically, much of the subsequent debate on the issue:

Power needs no justification, being inherent in the very existence of political communities; what it does need is legitimacy. The common treatment of these two words as synonyms is no less misleading and confusing than the current equation of obedience and support.<sup>73</sup>

The equation of legitimacy with justification amounts to a categorical error, for it pretends to question the origin of a decision when the very conditions for it to be judged as such are absent. Only once we understand ourselves and others as actors endowed with some power can we evaluate how such power is used. Before a space for possibility exists, it makes no sense to pass normative judgments on behaviors that are by definition necessitated.<sup>74</sup> Those that pretend to do so are covertly assuming that the foundational act is performed in the void, but somehow by an already constituted actor. Something that cannot happen in any real historical situation, not even the most revolutionary one. The familiarly problematic idea of a people constituted in advance of its constitution is nothing but the mirror image of the assumption that power is an ever-present phenomenon, covertly naturalizing individual subjectivities even before the collective one, and there-

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73. Arendt, *On Violence*, 52.

74. Incidentally, this is similar to the logic employed by Hobbes in constructing the abstraction of a natural state – where the only right is the right of superior force, which is utterly necessitating – and then denying that any question of justice may be posed within it: Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XIII.13. Kant argument against the right of resistance – which at once justified the French revolution, read as having happened after the King had passed his sovereignty to the assembly, and forbade any resistance against it – was clearly influenced by Hobbes, and might be the *trait d'union* with Arendt's distinction between justification and legitimacy (despite her scathing view of Kant's explicitly political writings), see: Immanuel Kant, "On the Common Saying 'This May Be True in Theory but it Does not Apply in Practice,'" in *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Immanuel Kant, "Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Right," in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 129-135 [AK 6: 318-325]; Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*.

fore allowing to ask (but never satisfactorily answering) the misleading question of who should be authorized to take the decision to constitute the political space.

However, once power is understood as categorically opposed to necessity – which is enough to establish that it cannot be a given, even if the determination of the precise conditions for it remains up for debate – its justification is automatic, so to speak, for whatever practical end one may have, they will have to be in a condition of power to achieve it. From this perspective, who performed the constitutive act matters little, while the content of the constitution in question, its aptness to create a proper political space, is a justification onto itself. This framing sidesteps the paradoxical attempts to find democratic legitimacy before the people may even be constituted as such, but at the same time points toward radical democracy, since the justification in question, from every citizen's point of view, resides in the space freed from necessity.

Immediately, this may just point toward a political domain available to whatever “in-group” one feels to be part of.<sup>75</sup> But the fact is that whoever is excluded from common appearances can only be dealt with under a modality of necessity. Thus, each and every exclusion weighs down the power potentially available to whoever happen to be included. It is well conceivable that complete inclusion may never be achieved: there will always be people who have to be taken care of (children, at the very least), and it may be that every people will have to define itself in opposition to others who do not belong. We are not taking any stand on these questions: instances of the gener-

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75. It still has to be a group, never an individual, though, since one alone may dominate everyone else, but will then be determined by the very necessity of maintaining his oppressive position. Thus, an oligarchic republic or other similarly limited systems may still constitute proper political spaces, but a tyranny or an absolute monarchy cannot.

al problem of determining the appropriate boundaries between the necessary and the possible. The point is rather that, whatever the domain of necessity will be at any given time, anyone interested in power, in the possibility to act in whatever way they deem best, has an intrinsic reason to keep such domain as small as it is feasible.

Such a plea for inclusion, based not on external/prior values but intrinsic to power itself, corresponds to the ideal of a universal recognition of equal personality (grounded by Kant on the transcendental conditions for freedom)<sup>76</sup> which has become a pillar of liberal democracy. However, the classic distinction between public and private, where the point is to guarantee as much individual liberty, understood as independent from politics,<sup>77</sup> cannot be maintained once the meaning of power, and its opposition to necessity, has been properly understood.

It is important to note how public-private distinction was still, in a way, based on the opposition between necessity and possibility, since the domain of the public, or the State, was made to coincide with a domain of coercive commands, whereas the private would have been the space left free from them. Even without committing to a precise individuation of the boundaries of necessity, however, we can promptly see how that partition cannot be it, for on both sides we find necessitated behaviors as well as contingent actions. Thus, as in the old Marxist critique, the cru-

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76. Kant, "Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Right," 50 [AK 6:223]; Arthur Ripstein, *Force and Freedom: Kant's Legal and Political Philosophy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 134-39.

77. Even though of course certain political regimes, whether enlightened despotism or democracy, may be considered more conducive than others to safeguard such freedom. For example: "Political equality is a matter not of political power but of political standing. Democracy confirms in the most dramatic way the equal concern and respect that the community together, as the custodian of coercive power, has for each of its members.": Ronald Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 390.



cial freedom of private contract is but a ruse when one of the parts is compelled by need;<sup>78</sup> but that is hardly the only example in which an individual, free from governmental interference, still experience various necessities: family and friendship bonds, social pressures, psychological or physical urges, and so on and so forth. The State, on the other hand, surely is the site of organized coercion and systemic imperatives, but also of public deliberation and the rare masterstroke of a great leader, *etc.*

Thus, the basic institution of legal personality has to be understood as cutting across the domains of public and private as traditionally conceived. Acts such as signing a contract, voting, participating in a demonstration, appearing before a court or being part of its jury, are all equally predicated on the definition of a person as a potential actor,<sup>79</sup> which is nothing but a representative fiction, and it has to be in order to sustain a space of appearances wherein possibilities may manifest. The constitution of persons, and the correlative world they can act into, is the criterion on which the justification of a political order has thus to be evaluated. This is a purely formalistic position, independent from the values or ends held by any of the participants, yet it is not as absolute as Kant's legalism was – precisely because the power that is to be made possible by this legal-political order is not a metaphysical quantity, but rather a contingent condition.

If a constitution fails to provide spaces adequately available for action, then it loses its justification from the point of view of power. If this justification is lost, the support for a political order

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78. Karl Marx, *Capital. Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin Classics, 1992), ch. 6.

79. *Supra*, pp. 77-79.

has perhaps to come from factors like shared identities, values, or interests – which are all the more exclusionary (for they differ from individual to individual) and anyway reducible to various forms of necessity. But the threshold at which law and politics cease to provide adequate conditions for power, to the point that the necessary disorder resulting from disobedience and violence might be preferable, cannot be neatly specified in advance. Disobeying or even employing violence against a tyrant, or a totalitarian leader, would surely be justified, whereas it would not be in a well-functioning democracy; but the point at which one should stop accepting a flawed political regime is a matter that cannot be solved in theory. A clear understanding can only provide general standards and concepts for the intrinsically contingent and contentious application of judgment.

We can now move to discuss the question of acting within a constituted space of appearances – the last actuality of obtaining and exercising power, or failing to do so. Here the persons who share any given space may or may not manage to act together. There may be cooperation, conflict, or just mutual indifference. They will, however, have at least the concrete power to act, even if their actions may fail to achieve what they intended.<sup>80</sup> In other words, the self-representative aspect of power will be present – persons will represent themselves as having possibilities available – even if its worldly effectiveness will obviously remain in question.

It is at this late point that the issues occupying most extant discourses about power – being indeed about the potentialities for the aforementioned worldly effectiveness – would find their

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80. Which in a sense is always the case, provided one takes a broad enough perspective in evaluating actions and their consequences: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 191-192, 224, 232-234.

proper place and perspective. Here we could evaluate a person's capacity to bring together a group and lead them into action, through rationality, persuasion, trickery, or with the implementation of further material and immaterial means to incentivize or to threaten. Here we could consider these means, what they specifically are or may be, their effectiveness and the way in which they limit the scope of power even while enhancing effectiveness. Here we could discuss how systemic conditions affect power and its exercise, the structures of property, culture, tradition, religion, or ideology. Here we could question the role of strategic, instrumental, rationality, in directing one's power toward certain goals.

All these, and more, remain important questions, which are contingently liable to different answers in different contexts. The analysis here undertaken, however, allow us to discriminate between instances in which the production of effects goes along with power, and others in which it is rather embedded in a necessary causal chain. This distinction could not be put into focus without an underlying conceptual clarity; and it is a distinction that matters both theoretically and practically. We may, in fact, observe the exact same event in the world – for example an employer exploiting the work of their employees. Yet, from the perspective of doing something about the witnessed event, or even merely judging it, everything changes if the act of producing effects through a potentiality is itself represented as possible rather than necessary – witness how the appeal to market forces are routinely used, successfully or not, to try to justify otherwise unsavory behaviors such as the exploitation of workers.

It may well be that the “who whom?”, attributed to Lenin,<sup>81</sup> is the most important question to ask with regard to power. But it makes all the difference whether the “who” and the “whom” are in a condition of power properly so called, and thus could act differently, or rather are bound in a chain of potentials necessarily being actualized across time – as perhaps an orthodox Marxist-Leninist would maintain. In the latter case, the very use of the “who” might be considered improper, for what kind of subject would one be, if entirely deprived of possibilities? It is only when there is a “who” to address, a person with some measure of power within a world we share, that normative questions can be posed. One does not attempt to persuade (or, indeed, neither to bribe, log-roll, or threaten) impersonal phenomena such as Capitalism, war, or poverty, nor the human beings that may happen to be determined by the systems they find themselves into.<sup>82</sup> Power does not necessarily imply the use of reasons (*supra*, § 4.2.2), but certainly is a condition for the use of justificatory reasons to make sense.

The accumulation of useful potentialities, either material and immaterial, may be a necessary condition for power, but it is also always an insufficient one. Without being in a space of possibility, whatever implement one has available can be nothing but a means for an end determined from without. The disclosure, through action, of “who” the actor is, as opposed to the various answers

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81. Leon Trotsky, “Towards Capitalism or Towards Socialism?”, *The Labour Monthly* 7, no. 11 (1925); Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 109.

82. Of course the judgment on whether someone is indeed so determined, or even whether it is even possible to be in such condition, is itself bound to be contentious.

to the ontological question of “what” we are,<sup>83</sup> thus goes together with the possibility of addressing one as a moral and political subject:

With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance.<sup>84</sup>

This “second birth” would be the one making us into the subject/agent which is presupposed, but not well accounted for, by both moral (or communicative, in Habermasian terms) and instrumental (strategic) reasoning. This “who”, defined by the ongoing narrative of our actions, is the person with a unique identity that can not only be a potential for effects (as any being can), but also entertain the representations of possibilities without which there is no power properly so called. And power being a necessary condition to think in means-ends term,<sup>85</sup> this person is the same who can determine their own ends,<sup>86</sup> an operation without which instrumental reasoning would be condemned to meaninglessness.<sup>87</sup>

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83. As opposed to the “what”, which could be answered by either factual or metaphysical enquiries: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 179-82.

84. *Ibid.*, 176-77.

85. Arendt, *On Violence*, 51. *Supra*, p. 107.

86. This would be the alternative to the idea of man as a paradoxical “end in itself”: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 155-56. Here Arendt’s critique against Kant may be considered ungenerous, for the way in which rational beings (not strictly mankind) are ends in themselves is precisely through their being originators of their own ends, which coheres with the idea of new beginnings interrupting causal chains: Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Thinking, 213-214, Willing, 29-30. There remains, however, the important difference that Arendt’s “who” is not a given, but rather only disclosed through action.

87. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 153-54.

From the vantage point of our analysis of power, thus, and in contrast to the common reading of Arendt as proposing a rarefied ideal of purposeless action,<sup>88</sup> we may see how the account of an actor appearing in the world, while surely not reducible to means-end terms, represent one of the conditions for them to make sense. For those who are not persons endowed with some power are by definition – be it in the moral or legal domain – incapable of determining their own ends.<sup>89</sup> It would thus be correct to say that “Arendt’s theory of political action should be read as the sustained attempt to think of *praxis* outside the teleological framework”;<sup>90</sup> but only if we had a clear understanding that thinking outside of teleology as traditionally conceived is a condition to make sense of our own power, therein including the power to think and act teleologically.

Thus, defining action, and therefore power and politics, in contrast to the goal-oriented character of work and instrumental thinking, is not to make it useless or idle, to deprive it of ends or concrete outcomes. Rather, one can surely achieve results through action,<sup>91</sup> the point is simply that neither the ends nor the outcomes define the action, or the space in which it appears, as such.

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88. Margaret Canovan, “The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt’s Political Thought,” *Political Theory* 6, no. 1 (1978); Alan Keenan, “Promises, Promises: The Abyss of Freedom and the Loss of the Political in the Work of Hannah Arendt,” *Political Theory* 22, no. 2 (1994); William E. Connolly, “A critique of pure politics,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 23, no. 5 (1997). There have been interesting “heterodox” takes on the issue, which have not yet received the attention they would deserve, see e.g.: James T. Knauer, “Motive and Goal in Hannah Arendt’s Concept of Political Action,” *The American Political Science Review* 74, no. 3 (1980); Jussi Backman, “The End of Action: An Arendtian Critique of Aristotle’s Concept of *praxis*,” in *Hannah Arendt: Practice, Thought and Judgement*, ed. Mika Ojakangas (Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, 2010); Lucy Cane, “Hannah Arendt on the principles of political action,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 14, no. 1 (2014); Steven Klein, “‘Fit to Enter the World’: Hannah Arendt on Politics, Economics, and the Welfare State,” *American Political Science Review* 108, no. 04 (2014).

89. They are not, as it were, “autotelic”: Parietti, “On the Autotelic Character of Politics.”

90. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, 28.

91. Even if action itself remains end-less, because the totality of its consequences can never be gauged: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 233.

Thus, for example, I might perform a speech with the goal of persuading my audience, and I may experience success or failure at that. But the performance of the action is defined by neither its end nor its outcome. In fact, if I delivered the same speech with a different goal in mind it would still represent the same action. Contrast this with the intrinsically goal-oriented activity of work. If I make a ceramic plate, or write a book, those end-products define the work as such, and if I were pursuing other results then by definition I would be doing not the same but a different work.

Action, power, and the world (as the space where they appear), cannot be reduced to instrumental/teleological reasoning, but they are conditions for it, starting from the very definition of a subject who may represent an end and act upon it. Effectively, the pretense to absolutize instrumental reason implies the claim that ends can be understood without an account of the subject who poses them – which would correspond to a naive metaphysical teleology, conclusively refuted at least since Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.<sup>92</sup>

From this perspective, we may appreciate the last, and most prevalent, intrinsic reason for the fragility of power and its correlative space of appearances. And that would be that the final use of power, to achieve some end in the world, is always in tension with its own conditions of possibilities, and often in serious and present danger of destroying them. We have first to consider how

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92. Arendt's engagement with the Kantian notion of judgment has been focused on the first part of the third critique, with a rather dismissive evaluation of the second part, concerning teleological judgment: Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 14. As a result, the authors influenced by Arendt have also been overwhelmingly concerned with aesthetics and morality, rather than teleology: *supra*, p. 68 fn. 28. This is, however, too limited a view of judgment and its relevance for politics, if anything because the two Kantian judgments are considerably more intertwined than allowed by Arendt. One can only wonder whether, had she not died too soon, Arendt's engagement with judgment could not have evolved in a more encompassing direction.

the act of posing an end transforms the shapeless condition of power, open to indeterminate possibilities, into a definite potentiality. We can maintain our condition as powerful actors insofar as we entertain the possibility of switching back and forth, so to speak, between a determinate and indeterminate state, that is to say: if the end itself remains at our disposal, rather than determining us.

We have to emphasize how this configuration is intrinsically liminal, for the interplay between the determined and undetermined is embedded into the concept of power itself. If only one aspect were present to us, we would fall either into an imaginary detachment from the world or into an equally world-less fixation on the result to be achieved. The former would correspond, for example, to the apathy of many citizens, or to the thoughtful flight from reality of many intellectuals, who may consider abstract possibilities without any chance of worldly success. Such attitudes may be problematic in the sense that they do not contribute to keep a common world into existence. The second option, that is to say a definitive shift from “power” to “potential-for”, is dangerous in a more active and immediate way, for it has direct effects on the world and our personality within it.

On the one hand, if we let the determination of ends overtake the availability of possibility to us, we simply lose our agency, individuality, and freedom – even while acting for ends is integral to the manifestation of “who” we are. This corresponds to the usual critiques of instrumental/technical rationality and the meaninglessness it can engender. More troubling still, however, is how ends can be used to justify means that are destructive of the public world. This is a present is-



sue for us, witnessing the widespread crisis of political norms *vis-à-vis* an increasingly polarized, at times rabid, partisanship.<sup>93</sup> Our contemporary predicaments, however, should not blind us to the fact that the destruction of the space of appearances in the pursuit of one or another overarching end/value goes at least as far back as the crisis of the last century of the Roman republic.

The shape of the ends, or values, that are prioritized over the maintenance of a shared world can vary enormously. From modern ideology (which itself can span the range from Stalinism to supply-side economics), to old-style religious fanaticism. From the thirst for self-affirmation of the prototypical emperor, to the ostentatiously righteous maxim “*fiat iustitia, et pereat mundus*” of a much later one. From the self-interest of a lobbying group, to the zealous idealism of another one. Despite their variability, we can now appreciate how these diverse instances of de-politicization, in thought and action, follow the same logic. The kind of reasoning that imperils politics, and therefore power, is always the one expressed by the pseudo-Machiavellian: “the end justifies the means.”<sup>94</sup>

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93. E.g. Marc J. Hetherington, and Jonathan D. Weiler, *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Sam Rosenfeld, *The Polarizers: Postwar Architects of Our Partisan Era* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

94. “Pseudo”, that is, not only because the exact words do not appear in Machiavelli’s work, but most importantly because his was the anti-moralistic realism of someone who wanted to save the republic, who loved his *patria* more than his *anima* (*supra*, p. 252), and in this sense the polar opposite of the common attitude to put one’s own ends above a shared world. The example of Agathocles (*The Prince*, ch. 8) is the one most commonly cited, but there we see how Machiavelli frames the question as one of saving one’s city and acquiring glory (explicitly contrasted to *imperio*), both corresponding to a public dimension, which would no longer have been available had Syracuse been conquered by the Carthaginians. Of course, Agathocles was a tyrant, and thus from our perspective a destroyer of the public realm, but that is not how Machiavelli chose to represent him. See also: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 35, 77-78.

Both the *dictum*, and its dangerous quality, are quite platitudinous; yet the usual framing, in terms of expediency against morality, misses the mark. Under that interpretation, we could only represent one end against another, and the issue would be to decide which hierarchy of values we should hold, but the teleological attitude would remain unchallenged. Thus, the Weberian “polytheism of values”<sup>95</sup> becomes a problem of competing hierarchies after the philosophical-theological one culminating in God was no longer tenable. But from our perspective, have one or many teleologies, the underlying reasoning remains the same. Such “pluralism”, still so widely used to frame our political issues,<sup>96</sup> is indeed just another denial of “plurality” in Arendt’s sense, for each value-hierarchy would just constitute an unworldly teleology onto itself.<sup>97</sup>

The relevant point, thus, is that any end, no matter if moral or pragmatic (or aesthetic, or whatever), may justify the deterioration or even destruction of the space of appearances. In practice, many acts – and especially political actions in the context of party- or faction-competition – can benefit from flouting a norm or three. This leads to coordination problems that are familiar to political scientists, and that often can be solved only through veritable flights from empirics.<sup>98</sup>

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95. Weber, “The Vocation Lectures,” 22-24.

96. Most influentially, “... a basic feature of democracy is the fact of reasonable pluralism – the fact that a plurality of conflicting reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious, philosophical, and moral, is the normal result of its culture of free institutions.”: John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 441. Rawls solution in terms of public reason – more than most alternatives – is indeed trying to move in the right direction, but without having a proper concept of power, and an understanding of its tension with teleological reasoning, is ultimately impossible to escape the sterile framing of one end/value against another.

97. In this sense, the common labeling of these sets of values, and the opinions derived from them, as “world-views” is quite paradoxical, see e.g.: Jürgen Habermas, “‘Reasonable’ versus ‘True’ or the Morality of Worldviews,” in *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1998).

98. The most famous of which is the assumption of infinite repetitions for the prisoner dilemma game; on such condition, cooperation may be a winning strategy: Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic

Regarding theory, we have observed in the previous chapter how political philosophies based on values, or anyway teleological constructions, fail to conceptualize power, and therefore to be political in the first place. Arendt's critique of modernity would itself better be read in this light.<sup>99</sup> For the "diagnosis of the times" she had in common with so many other thinkers, but most important was the uncovering of the intrinsic, and yet deeply problematic, relation between power and means-end reasoning we have here attempted to unfold.

In the explicit analysis of such intertwinement both the diagnosis and the potential solution for the fragility of the space of appearances lie. Because our condition as teleological, intentional, beings is predicated on power, we have an intrinsic reason to respect laws and norms that constitute the public space, and even to sacrifice our ends and ourselves if needed for the safety of the republic.

Such attitude, indeed, is nothing new, it corresponds to a textbook understanding of civic obligation in a democracy, as well as to the ancient republican ethos. The problems come, much as in the case of providing a definition of "power", when we try to make the shift from an ordinary folk understanding of political obligations to an explicit and well grounded justification for them. There innumerable attempts fail because they cannot conceive of anything but an end/value as a

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Books, 1984). But what is that if not a covert detachment from the horizon of a single individual, within which a sub-optimal result would be dictated by instrumental rationality? After all, any player at some point will at least have to die, thus leaving the game; but also leaving behind a world for others to act into, which cannot be accounted in game-theoretical terms except by a particularly anodyne formalization of immortality.

99. In contrast, for example, with appropriations of Arendt within quasi-philosophies of history, which she could hardly have accepted, see e.g.: Agamben, *Homo Sacer*; Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitica e filosofia* (Torino: Einaudi, 2004).

candidate for justification, and are thus bound to partiality when they are trying to ground what has to be, by definition, a space available to all persons.

As we saw, the shared world, the space of appearances we may act and exercise power into, has to be an inherently formal, “a-telic”, representation, bound to frailty in the face of the demands imposed by any substantive goal, or value. The transcendental reasoning grounding the respect for this common space of possibility, thus, is bound to appear equally weak,<sup>100</sup> for it does not manifest itself into any specified end – and the orientation towards an end has been, at least since Plato and Aristotle, the main way in which we represent a stable and concrete reality.<sup>101</sup> The different quests – all potentially legitimate in their own domains – for metaphysical certainties, empirical data, moral absolutes, and quantitative methodologies, can in this sense be seen as different manifestations of a yearning for the stability of being. That is surely a powerful drive, and we have to recognize how intrinsic it is to our condition, therein including our having, sometimes, power. At once, it is only from within a condition of power that teleological reasoning can have, for us, any meaning.

The constant renegotiation of this duality is intrinsic to all our moral, scientific, political, and philosophical endeavors. Yet, if in practice we cannot avoid to find ourselves in such an ambiguous condition, our theoretical perspectives are overwhelmingly occupied by the categories of being and necessity, with hardly any space for power and possibility. This imbalance has to be con-

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100. The same weakness observed with regard to law, *supra*, p. 259

101. Prevalingly understood as a product of work, be it God’s creation of the universe or our making of all the objects we use daily to make ourselves at home: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 135-39.

fronted, if we want to be able to think what we are doing.<sup>102</sup> If the root philosophical enquiry may be spelled out as “why is there Being instead of nothing?”<sup>103</sup> the corresponding political question would be “how can there appear possibilities, rather than necessity?”

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102. *Supra*, p. 73.

103. Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 1-19.



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